11 April 2023

Professor Mary O'Kane AC
Chair, Australian Universities Accord
Commonwealth Department of Education
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Professor O'Kane,

RE: AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES ACCORD DISCUSSION PAPER - REGIONAL EDUCATION SUPPORT NETWORK SUBMISSION

The Regional Education Support Network (**RESN**) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Australian Universities Accord Discussion Paper (the Paper). RESN is a registered not-for-profit that provides free, high-quality education support to regional, rural and remote high school students across New South Wales and Victoria. RESN has provided Q&A services, syllabus notes and quizzes, and small-group online tuition to over 2,500 students since 2018 through our custom-built web application. Our network of over 100 volunteers are a group of passionate university students who believe in an Australia in which geography does not dictate access to high quality educational support.

Executive summary

The Australian government has invested more funding into the higher education system, leading to an increase in tertiary students, with 47.8% of people aged under 25 enrolled in a Bachelor's degree (Hare, 2022). Higher education is a commodity which yields not only economic advantage, but social and cultural benefits like propagating norms and encouraging national civic participation (Altbach, 2002). However, access to this commodity is limited by the geographic lottery. Regional students across Australia face significant barriers in aspiring for and gaining admission to higher education, simply by virtue of their postcode.

Out of the 49 discussion questions outlined in the Paper, this submission seeks to highlight findings on increasing tertiary enrolment of students from regional communities. Robust financial support of community-led organisations like RESN is critical to achieving the long-term strategic goals of the tertiary sector. Research has proven that RESN's service methodology is effective at raising students' aspiration for higher education, improving academic performance, and helping students develop positive study habits. To diversify tertiary student cohorts and safeguard the academic integrity of our educational institutions, investment in organisations such as RESN is a necessity.

Q 11: How should Australia boost demand from people to study in the higher education system?

Australia can boost demand for higher education by raising students' aspirations for higher education, and their awareness of available financial support and in-demand skillsets.

Aspiration is a key barrier to students enrolling in higher education. Sharon Hill, VCE Coordinator at Seymour College, told RESN that 'one of the biggest issues for country kids is aspiration...many of our students wouldn't have seen what a university looks like'. Many regional students do not have family members who have received higher education and students often find themselves without role models to turn to. These aspirational disparities

translate into lower student motivation and engagement, with 15% fewer students completing their VCE or VCAL in some regional areas (Lamb et al, 2014). Consequently, schools request that RESN mentors speak to their students numerous times throughout the year - 'it's good for the students to see young people at university...it's good for them to have that exposure...it opens students' perspectives in terms of what options are available to them' (Sharon Hill). Aspiration-raising initiatives like RESN are critical to increasing student demand for higher education.

Another important lever is increased communication with and support for underrepresented cohorts. Machin et al (2007) recommend policy initiatives to incentivise students to study subject areas for which there is a high demand in the labour market. With the prospect of job security, there will follow a greater demand for studying in the higher education system. The authors also acknowledge that informing students of the beneficial outcomes of studying in higher education may help boost demand. The authors also identify socioeconomic status as a significant, albeit surmountable, barrier to participating in higher education. Their paper offers two potential solutions: bursaries, and the public provision of more places in tertiary education. Given the benefits of education, this spending is a trade-off between short term cost for long term economic and social gain (Ikiz, 2019). Moreover, while the Australian Government and tertiary education system have significantly improved the number of bursaries, scholarships and financial aid available to a diverse cohort, the accessibility of these supports is hindered by a lack of awareness. RESN publishes a list of available financial support for regional students, based on many students' experiences of discovering available supports for which they were eligible, but missing out on due to a lack of knowledge.

COVID-19 has also had an undeniably detrimental effect on the Australian higher education system, particularly given the tertiary sector's reliance on international students (Bairagi, 2020). In the 'new normal', the federal government and universities must support initiatives like RESN that increase demand from traditionally underrepresented groups of domestic students.

Q 28: What is needed to increase the number of people from under-represented groups applying to and prepared for higher education, both from school and from other pathways?

Regional students are underrepresented in higher education. To address this inequity, the federal government and tertiary sector must invest in organisations like RESN, which have proven models to both raise regional students' aspirations for higher education, and support their academic success to achieve these aspirations.

Regional students must be supported to aspire for higher education. Research on the attitudes of regional students towards higher education reveals that these students need assistance to 'believe' that they can make the transition to university and city life (Fleming and Grace, 2017). Peer mentoring has been found to be an extremely effective method of raising students' aspirations for education after high school. University student mentoring of regional and low-SES high school students is strongly correlated with a higher likelihood of aspirations to attend university and TAFE (Curtis et al, 2012). RESN's tutors are relatable mentors who provide both formal and informal mentoring on tertiary education opportunities to students. RESN supports this mentoring with a comprehensive suite of guides and resources tailored to regional students, designed to clarify the degree pathways and regional entry options available at tertiary institutions across the country. Indeed, NSW Government research found that over a third of students surveyed would feel more confident about their future education and career opportunities if they had access to role models, mentors, and learning support in a variety of fields. The federal government and tertiary sector should invest heavily in organisations like RESN, who deliver this evidence-based mentoring and learning support.

It is also imperative that regional students receive robust educational support, so that they can go on to achieve their aspirations for higher education. Without this sort of support, aspirations will ultimately go unfulfilled. To improve participation rates, aspiration and performance must come hand in hand. One RESN student states passionately that:

> 'Regional students don't just want more special entry guidelines and lower ATAR requirements to enable them access into higher level University courses. Lower entry requirements for rural students won't close the education gap, having the resources to enable them to get the same marks as metro students will.'

Hattie's (2009) meta-analysis finds that receiving consistent feedback is one of the most powerful influences on student achievement (see also Wisniewski et al, 2020). Many regional schools are understaffed, meaning teachers' time is scarce and feedback is very limited. One school in NSW that uses RESN's services has had to implement a 'two essays, two pages' policy, restricting the quantity of work students can submit to prevent teachers from being overwhelmed. RESN's completely personalised feedback, provided by qualified tutors and available 24/7, is an enormous learning boost for students whose access to feedback is otherwise severely constrained. Indeed, 90% of our users said that these resources provided high-quality assistance that they otherwise would not have access to. To increase regional students' participation in higher education, the federal government and tertiary sector must invest in proven initiatives like RESN that help students reach their academic goals.

Q 34: How should the contribution of higher education providers to community engagement be encouraged and promoted?

Regional students face a range of barriers that can make it difficult for them to access higher education opportunities. Universities have a responsibility to address these barriers and promote equity for all students, and community organisations should play a crucial role in this process. By partnering with organisations that serve and support traditionally underrepresented groups, universities can gain a better understanding of the challenges and opportunities that exist in these communities. They can also establish new connections with potential students and their families, which can be critical for building trust and promoting enrolment.

The tertiary sector has the exciting opportunity to partner with community organisations, playing a facilitative and supportive role for these existing, successful initiatives. Community organisations like RESN have established relationships with students, schools and families. As a result, they are often better positioned to reach students with academic support and peer mentoring. One of the key benefits of engaging with community organisations is the opportunity to learn from the experiences and perspectives of underrepresented groups. These organisations are often a primary out-of-school point of contact for students, and they have a deep understanding of the unique challenges that these groups face. By listening to these perspectives, universities can develop new strategies and initiatives that better meet the needs of underrepresented students.

Moreover, students are receptive to information provided by these organisations - they are trusted, authentic sources embedded in the fabric of the communities they serve. RESN's students and their teachers consistently emphasise that their tutors being a similar age and having similar life experiences contributes greatly to the value they derive from our services. This familiarity and understanding enables organisations like RESN to communicate effectively and engage with the target audience in a way that universities cannot, including by providing tailored and culturally relevant support to students. Community organisations like RESN are uniquely positioned to help universities to pursue greater equity by providing targeted support and outreach to underrepresented groups (e.g., workshops and information

sessions on the application process and financial support). By working with community organisations to provide these services, universities can help to level the playing field, dramatically increasing the likelihood of students succeeding academically and pursuing higher education.

Engaging with community organisations can also help universities to build stronger relationships with underrepresented groups and their wider communities. By demonstrating their commitment to promoting educational equity, universities can foster goodwill and trust, which can be important for attracting and retaining students from these groups.

Universities must invest in funding community organisations like RESN that support high school students to succeed at school and aspire for higher education. Such investments will enable universities to increase their enrolment of students from diverse backgrounds, as these community organizations are often better equipped to communicate effectively with students and understand their needs.

Q 42: What settings are needed to ensure academic integrity, and how can new technologies and innovative assessment practices be leveraged to improve academic integrity?

Poor academic practice is a serious challenge for the Australian tertiary sector. TEQSA has banned 150 websites offering contract cheating services, and has over 500 more suspected websites under review. These websites are visited millions of times per year. Vicki Thomson, CEO of the Group of Eight Universities, argues that cheating and poor academic practice 'represent a significant threat to community confidence in academic standards.'

However, poor academic practice does not begin in university. Cheating in high school is a strong indicator of continuing to do so at university (Harding et al, 2007). There are a number of reasons students feel the need to cheat, reasons which extend far beyond a simple desire to have an unfair advantage over their peers. A substantive academic integrity agenda should prioritise removing the root causes of academic misconduct in high school rather than simply aiming to detect and penalise it once the student moves on to university.

Students can often feel that they are not supported to develop positive study habits, or that they are not receiving the sort of feedback they need to improve their results. Research demonstrates that receiving positive reinforcement and supportive feedback discourages academic dishonesty (Lee, 2009; Murdock, 1999). Students in regional areas are disadvantaged by the geographic lottery - with fewer teachers, tutoring opportunities and support resources available - and so are especially vulnerable to the feelings of helplessness that often precipitate a resort of academic dishonesty. This is why services like RESN are a critical investment for the tertiary sector. By providing the sort of detailed, personalised feedback that would otherwise be unavailable, RESN helps regional students develop good study habits for university instead of resorting to cheating practices.

Ahsan et al's recent meta-study on contract cheating confirms this hypothesis. They find that "contract cheating [paying for an assignment and passing it off as your own], as an industry, grows out of students' needs for assistance in learning and completing assessment tasks. Students face difficulties completing assessment tasks because of their own circumstances, or due to factors beyond their control" (Ahsan et al, 2022). Underprivileged students in regional areas are extremely vulnerable to these sorts of exogenous factors that give rise to cheating behaviour. RESN's services help level the playing field by providing the resources necessary for students to succeed through their own hard work, rather than through academic dishonesty. Moreover, RESN's tutors model good academic practice and the benefits of diligent study to our students. This sort of positive peer influence has been proven to have a significant effect on discouraging cheating (Malesky et al, 2022).

The challenges faced by regional high school students in accessing high-quality educational support should be viewed as an explanatory factor in subsequent academic misconduct in university education. The systemic disadvantages faced by these students can, in many cases, deny them the opportunity to form positive relationships with learning and revision. Investing in academic support programs like RESN - which help these students develop good study habits and a passion for learning - is critical if the federal government and tertiary sector wish to address the root cause of cheating rather than simply punish such behaviour.

Summary of recommendations

The federal government and tertiary education sector must invest in community organisations like RESN if it wishes to increase regional students' participation in higher education. RESN and other organisations have proven models to raise students' aspirations for higher education and support their academic success. Peer mentoring and personalized feedback are powerful tools that help regional students believe in their ability to succeed in higher education and achieve their academic goals. This support will also advance the long-term goal of addressing the root causes of academic misconduct, with services like RESN helping regional students to develop good study habits instead of resorting to cheating practices at university. Investment in RESN and similar organisations would be a critical step towards increasing diversity in student bodies and ensuring durable academic integrity.

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