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Dear Professor Scott

Teacher Education Expert Panel Discussion Paper

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the Teacher Education Expert Panel Discussion Paper.

In my role as Australia's independent Regional Education Commissioner, I champion the needs of people from our regions throughout their education journey from early childhood through school, vocational education and training and higher education, and the pathways between.

In line with this remit, my comments focus on regional, rural and remote (RRR) communities, in the context of my extensive conversations with people in the regions as Commissioner over the last 18 months and decades of living and working in regional Australia, framed in response to the four reform areas on which the Panel seeks advice:

1. Strengthen ITE programs to deliver confident effective, classroom ready graduates
2. Strengthen the link between performance and funding of ITE
3. Improve the quality of practical experience in teaching
4. Improve postgraduate ITE for mid-career entrants.

Education helps people imagine and create better futures for themselves. I believe that the advantages of a quality school education should not be limited by location. Viewing all four of these themes through a regional lens has the potential to bring enormous benefits to the one third of Australians living outside metropolitan areas, who have unique experiences and different needs from people in our cities.

Key themes raised by stakeholders in relation to teacher training and workforce needs

During my first year as Regional Education Commissioner, I consulted widely with people across our regions to seek their views on education, including the critical issue of teachers in regional schools.

As I described in my 2022 Annual Report (available at <https://www.education.gov.au/regional-education-commissioner/resources/regional-education-commissioner-annual-report-2022>), the most common issue in my conversations with stakeholders is the critical shortage of teachers — this remains one of the biggest challenges facing primary and secondary schools. Although teacher education is the second most common field of study in Australia, there are major workforce shortages including for primary, secondary, and special needs teachers; and these shortages are exacerbated in our regions.

These concerns about workforce shortages are born out in data. The Regional Australia Institute's [Regional Jobs 2022: The Big Skills Challenge](#) report, released earlier this month, showed that education professionals (excluding early childhood and education aides) experienced the third highest year-on-year vacancy growth of any job category in our regions. In regional NSW, the figures are even more stark — over the last five

years, education experienced the largest increase in vacancies, with teacher vacancies in December 2022 more than six times what they were a decade ago, and up more than 20 per cent year on year.

Stakeholders have told me that in schools, there is a particular shortage for specialisations such as Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) teachers. Across Australia, one in four Year 8 students is learning maths without a teacher qualified in mathematics. This lack of specialist teachers interacts with and exacerbates fewer subject choices for students in RRR areas, and together can affect aspiration and access for further study.

The 2021 Quality Initial Teacher Education Review noted that many stakeholders raised social status and relative attractiveness of the teaching profession as reasons for declining initial teacher education commencements. In the general survey, 70 per cent of respondents indicated if teaching was more highly respected it would be a great deal more appealing to both mid-career professionals and school leavers. These issues appear in sharp focus in our regions, where teacher attraction is an issue of primary concern that interacts with a range of other critical issues in RRR areas, including housing, workload, access to child care and remuneration. One proposed solution discussed at roundtables is the idea of a teachers' aide gap year to incentivise exiting year 12 students to work as teachers' aides during a gap year. Other proposed solutions included developing an apprenticeship model, and the creation of 'rural teacher training' pathways.

Retention is another major concern nationally, leading to young and inexperienced teachers being overwhelmed by workload and isolated in understaffed schools. These phenomena are particularly acute in the regions. Stakeholders raised possible solutions including reduced workloads, improving community connections, providing ongoing learning opportunities, and financial incentives to encourage teachers to stay in RRR schools.

Stakeholders identified that three key factors contribute to these shortages:

- a lack of local training options creates a barrier to studying and qualifying in-region, and the converse — RRR residents leave to study and do not return
- difficulty attracting skilled educators to the regions
- low retention.

The steady increase in school enrolments in RRR areas intensifies these shortages, as demand increases while nationally, ITE graduates declined between 2017 and 2020.

Strengthening ITE programs to deliver confident, effective classroom ready graduates

As I noted in my Annual Report, RRR Australia is a unique environment for teachers. It is important that prospective RRR pre-service teachers are made aware of the different challenges they will face in RRR schools and communities before they are exposed during placements. ITE plays a key role here. Research has consistently shown that pre-service teachers often have an under-developed, vague, or unrealistic understanding of what teaching and living in a RRR community involves. In smaller communities where local teachers are well known and respected, teachers are 'always on'. Early-career teachers may find they are underprepared to teach in multi-age classrooms, fail to engage with the different experiences and responsibilities of their students, experience social, geographic and professional isolation, housing stress, lack of permanency, and burnout. Ensuring teacher education prepares them for this challenging but rewarding environment may increase their longevity and enrich their experiences as RRR teachers.

Increasing the number of First Nations teachers and support workers would benefit schools and all students, ensuring First Nations students receive culturally appropriate education aligned with community, as well as providing strong role models demonstrating post-school transitions and pathways. I encourage you to consider the creation of a separate category to elevate First Nations teachers from 'assistant teachers' to 'partner teachers', in recognition of their unique skills and cultural knowledge, which are fundamental to learning. I am aware that such an initiative would not necessarily be administratively straightforward, and would require a flexible approach in light of existing requirements.

The *More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teachers Initiative*, in strong consultation with community, made several recommendations to address First Nations peoples becoming and remaining teachers. The message was clear: creating a culturally diverse workforce meets the needs of a culturally diverse student population.

Strengthen the links between performance and funding of ITE

It is important that the development of any standardised performance measures takes account of the distinct needs and contexts in regional areas compared to our cities, to ensure that courses for prospective RRR and First Nations teaching students can involve communities in co-design, invoke appropriate and relevant cultural authority, and be properly targeted, without disadvantage to those institutions or students compared to institutions that may predominantly focus on metropolitan catchments and educationally advantaged graduates. Without these perspectives and contexts, there is a risk that performance-linked funding will increase educational disadvantage in our regions, rather than alleviate it.

I encourage the Panel to consider recommending increased funding for regionally based universities providing ITE courses that have high rates of graduate RRR employment. For instance, in medicine, regionally trained medical graduates are far more likely to practice their profession in RRR communities. Targeted funding would incentivise universities to elevate their ITE curricula and ensure ITE students are well supported, helping address teaching shortages in RRR communities.

However, overcoming the shortage of teachers in RRR schools should not be solely the responsibility of regional universities — it requires a nationally coordinated, targeted approach, and policies and incentives should support and encourage all universities to provide well-supported placements in RRR areas for ITE.

Improve the quality of practical experience in teaching

Targeted teacher education and placements may provide a key mitigant to both the problem of attraction and the problem of retention of teachers in RRR schools. Ensuring new teachers have received specific and high-quality preparation for the experience of teaching in a RRR school will set them up for success. Mentorship provided by experienced teachers is an important part of the mix, which must be supplemented by real world experience in RRR classrooms. Positive experiences during placements will lead to increased retention of teachers in the regions.

Teaching apprenticeships are a practical way to ensure new teachers have ample on the job experience to complement academic theory, and develop familiarity with regional classroom environments; earning a wage while learning can ease the financial burdens of training. There are models in other professions that could guide greater support, such as the Rural Health Multidisciplinary Training program, and education-specific initiatives such as the High Achieving Teachers Program and bursaries specifically seek to address teacher shortages. For ITE, a collaborative, community-led model may look like a network of RRR training providers, structured placement opportunities, training hubs and local communities.

As mentioned above, stakeholders proposed other initiatives that may warrant investigation, including a teachers' aide gap year and the creation of 'rural teacher training' pathways.

Improve postgraduate ITE for mid-career entrants

The key matter for RRR schools in relation to this reform area lies in the perennial issue of attracting teachers to the regions and retaining them. As in the case of undergraduate teachers, pre-service preparation, supported RRR placements, strong in-school leadership, ongoing learning and professional development opportunities, mentoring, and innovative community practices are all essential to attract mid-career teaching graduates to RRR schools, and retain them.

Options for consideration

My Annual Report includes a number of 'Considerations', including two that are particularly relevant to the discussion paper and the question of teacher education to improve the supply and quality of education professionals in our regions. I encourage you to consider their practicality:

Consideration 6: The Initial Teacher Education Expert Panel process is an opportunity to consider the role of training in encouraging and preparing students to consider a career in RRR teaching. It should include an explicit focus on:

- expanding RRR content within Initial Teacher Education course offerings to better inform and prepare students about teaching in RRR Australia
- increasing RRR placements during study, including early placements, and considering how to support students financially and otherwise during placements.

Consideration 7: Create a Year 12 school leavers Teachers' Aide program for RRR schools to aid schools facing a teacher shortage. Participating Year 12 school leavers would take a gap year to work as a Teachers' Aide in a regional school before commencing their tertiary education. Consideration should be given to HECS relief and VET-FEE HELP, and recognition of prior learning for those who complete the program.

An effective, wraparound approach will engage and collaborate with regional and First Nations communities to design tailored delivery models that recognise communities' diversity, and from a student-centred perspective, properly prepare graduates and pre-service teachers for the unique challenges and rewards of teaching in regional Australia.

I hope that this information is useful. Please do not hesitate to contact me at Fiona.Nash@education.gov.au if you would like to discuss these comments. I look forward to continuing to work with the Panel on its valuable work on initial teacher education.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Fiona Nash".

Fiona Nash

Regional Education Commissioner

26 May 2023