

6. Regional, rural and remote education strategy: targets, implementation and monitoring

Issues

- The Regional Education Expert Advisory Group (EAG) have been tasked with developing a National Regional, Rural and Remote Education Strategy, focussed on identifying ways to improve tertiary education outcomes.
- This paper is focused on the Strategy including its aim, targets, monitoring and implementation arrangements, including consideration of a RRR Education Commissioner to oversee implementation of the Strategy. Other issues papers (1-5) provide options and ideas for actions to underpin the Strategy.
- This work responds to, and seeks to build on, the 2017 Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education led by Emeritus Professor John Halsey - specifically Recommendation 11: 'Establish a national focus for RRR education, training and research to enhance access, outcomes and opportunities in regional Australia.' Linked to this recommendation, it also canvassed the appointment of a RRR Education Commissioner.
- While the term RRR is used throughout the issues papers, it is recognised there are significant differences between regional, and rural and remote areas, with many inner regional areas being more closely aligned to metropolitan areas in terms of access to services. By comparison, rural and remote areas typically have smaller populations, limited or even non-existent public transport options, internet connectivity and reliability issues and less education options. Their populations face different challenges.
- The current geographical classification system (Major Cities, Inner Regional, Outer Regional, Remote and Very Remote) used by the Australian Bureau of Statistics is not specifically designed to measure relative access to education. While some communities identify themselves as "rural" sometimes in association with particular industries such as agriculture, this term does not correspond to any specific location category within this framework. Further consideration of these issues is required.

Discussion

Aims and objectives

Consultations and submissions have highlighted three related objectives of critical importance:

1. Addressing the very significant inequities in tertiary education access, participation and attainment for Australians living in RRR areas.
2. Maximising the role that tertiary education and institutions can play in building stronger RRR communities.
3. The need to recognise the diversity of RRR Australia and not try to impose a one size fits all approach. A range of solutions is needed to meet the diverse needs of RRR communities, taking into account their varying economic and demographic needs including population density.

Overall, further effort is needed to support all Australians to reach their potential without being limited by where they live. The pursuit of more equal opportunities in order to correct the disparity in outcomes for those living in RRR areas requires governments to consider specific support and investment strategies. Investing in RRR students and communities is nation building in the same way as investing in urban infrastructure. It strengthens them, building skills and capacity, opportunity and growth. This in turn, builds the capacity and opportunities for the nation as a whole. The following draft overarching aim has been identified to potentially underpin the Strategy:

To improve tertiary education access, participation and attainment to address current inequalities for people in regional, rural and remote communities; to support students and their aspirations and enhance their communities.

While support programs at the national level have an important role to play, there is also a need to consider specific investment and support strategies tailored to the diverse needs of communities.

- Across all areas, students need information, financial and other support to successfully undertake tertiary education whether in their home community or if they relocate to city areas.
- In regional centres, many of which already have local access to a range of course offerings, there is potential to expand access and improve outcomes by building the capacity of local providers.
- Less well-serviced and more remote areas which have small populations require more innovative strategies such as shared infrastructure to support distance learning (blended where possible with face-to-face support) and outreach models. Reliable internet access is critical to achieving outcomes in such areas.

Targets

The following potential high-level targets for attainment in inner regional, outer-regional and remote¹ areas have been identified – with separate targets for each location category:

1. Halve the disparity in attainment of post school qualifications in inner regional compared to metropolitan areas, outer-regional compared to metropolitan areas and remote areas compared to metropolitan areas.
In 2016, post-school attainment rates for 25-34 year olds were around 66 per cent in metropolitan areas compared to 57 per cent for inner regional areas, 53 per cent in outer regional areas and 45 per cent in remote areas².
2. Halve the disparity in attainment of Certificate IV and above qualifications in regional and remote areas compared to metropolitan areas.
In 2016, Certificate 14 and above attainment rates for 25-34 year olds were around 54 per cent in metropolitan areas compared to 34 per cent for inner regional areas, 31 per cent in outer regional areas and 26 per cent in remote areas³.
3. Halve the disparity in attainment of bachelor degree and above qualifications in regional and remote areas compared to metropolitan areas.
In 2016, bachelor degree and above attainment rates for 25-34 year olds were around 40 per cent in metropolitan areas compared to 21 per cent for inner regional areas, 19 per cent in outer regional areas and 16 per cent in remote areas⁴.

These targets recognise the different economic and labour needs of RRR communities, including the focus on VET in more remote areas. Consideration needs to be given to the appropriate age range (e.g. 16-34, 25-64 years) for such targets, noting that RRR students are on average older than students in metropolitan areas. In addition, consideration needs to be given to the appropriate timeframe for achieving targets, noting that earlier progress may be possible, for example, on increasing VET and higher education participation, compared to increasing attainment rates. A range of further, more detailed indicators to monitor as part of the strategy will also need to be determined, taking into account the diversity of RRR communities and the role education institutions play in those areas.

¹ Remote includes both Remote and Very Remote location categories. Monitoring Very Remote by itself is problematic due to the small numbers of people and potential volatility involved.

² Australian Government Department of Education and Training (2018) Internal Analysis based on the Australian Census of Population and Housing, 2016 (accessed through Census TableBuilder), Australian Government, Canberra.

³ Australian Government Department of Education and Training (2018) Internal Analysis based on the Australian Census of Population and Housing, 2016 (accessed through Census TableBuilder), Australian Government, Canberra.

⁴ Australian Government Department of Education and Training (2018) Internal Analysis based on the Australian Census of Population and Housing, 2016 (accessed through Census TableBuilder), Australian Government, Canberra.

Regional Education Commissioner

Consultations and submissions provided mixed views on the value of establishing an independent Commissioner. Some felt it would be a valuable signal to the nation that addressing regional education is an issue of national importance. However, there were also concerns raised about the potential to create another layer of bureaucracy and a 'toothless tiger', noting the role would need to be empowered in order to be influential with key stakeholders including governments, education providers, community and industry.

Consultations suggested that should the Government not proceed with this proposal, there would be a case to establish some level of implementation and monitoring effort, for example through a dedicated team within the Australian Government. The ability to achieve meaningful, measurable change in the short and long-term will be influenced by the efforts of all governments. Coordinating this effort in some way, together with the contribution of other stakeholders, will be important.

Potential roles and responsibilities of a Regional Education Commissioner include:

- report annually on progress with implementing the Strategy and tertiary education participation and outcomes in RRR areas
- be a Champion for RRR education, keeping the issues at the forefront of government and the public and articulating relevance to broader policy and the national benefit
- work closely and engage strategically with peak RRR parent, student and community bodies, universities and regional universities and TAFE/training bodies
- bring together education related efforts across governments and communities to ensure connection and information sharing between initiatives (joined up approaches), including advocacy and sharing of emerging issues and best practice
- provide advice on regional development issues by working with stakeholders to build partnerships and enhance the contribution of tertiary education to regional development
- advocate RRR investment and philanthropy as a means of developing national social cohesion, economic development and nation building, and
- assist in the start-up phase of new hubs and other initiatives.

There was some support in consultations for a medium to long-term appointment, for example for five years. An option may be to have an initial period related to the national RRR Education Strategy, of say two years initially, with the possibility of extension based on the level of implementation activity and oversight required and the effectiveness of the role.

Possible further actions

The EAG is seeking feedback on the issues canvassed in this paper including:

- possible targets and other performance measures
- the Commissioner proposal and potential functions that could be attached to this role, and
- other potential approaches and governance models to coordinate implementation activity.