



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
MELBOURNE



## **Response to the *National Regional, Rural and Remote Education Strategy Issues Papers***

**20 March 2019**

## Executive Summary

The University of Melbourne welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Regional Education Expert Advisory Group's Issue Papers and further contribute to the National Regional, Rural and Remote Education Strategy. The University, a provider of education in RRR areas, acknowledges the importance of increasing rural, regional and remote (RRR) students' participation in post-secondary education and contributes to that objective through its education programs and via its rurally-based campuses. The Issues Papers identify a variety of actions and issues which are discussed in this submission. The University's previous submission to this review (along with its submission to the Halsey Review) covered, in-depth, examples of its engagement in RRR areas and providing education to RRR students. This response selects several areas for further comment.

### Summary of Key Points

The key points of the submission are as follows:

- To promote teaching quality and support in RRR areas, the Government should commit to funding paid practicums as placements in RRR areas as these have been shown to increase Teacher Candidates' openness to working in RRR schools.
- The Strategy should consider the introduction of 'funding envelopes' for the Commonwealth Grant Scheme, providing a mechanism for guaranteeing that a share of growth places is taken up at campuses outside of major cities.
- To support pathways to VET and other learning, a collaborative mapping exercise should be conducted to identify the disciplinary strengths and workforce training capacity of all RRR providers. This will also identify how educational RRR pathways can be streamlined and promoted.
- Careers advice in schools is an important source of information and aspiration raising for students, wherever they are learning. Issues Paper recommendations that focus on the need to lift the quality and availability of careers advice is supported.
- Universities provide programs to address financial disadvantage and other equity issues, including RRR disadvantage. Additional Government resourcing will enable universities to expand the opportunities available. The University urges the expansion of HEPPP to meet demonstrated RRR need and further fund these programs, rather than quarantining a portion of existing funding for other disadvantaged students and re-allocating it to RRR programs.
- The University supports the Issues Paper suggestion of additional places for regional university providers, including for enabling and sub-bachelor courses, aligned with the teaching and research strengths of institutions, and that meet local needs.
- Rather than diverting the existing cohort of international students to RRR areas, the Strategy should aim to attract international students to RRR areas by developing a compelling value proposition based on the competitive advantages of institutions in particular localities and with particular discipline strengths.
- The Strategy should be overseen by a single body that is also responsible for overseeing other education strategies, rather than the proposed stand-alone commissioner. Success should be measured by setting goals that are reflective of the breadth and diversity of the post-secondary system. A unique student identifier for all post-secondary students should be considered to aid the assessment of institutional performance.

**For further information**, or to discuss this submission, please contact Dr Julie Wells, Vice-President (Strategy and Culture) at [Julie.wells@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:Julie.wells@unimelb.edu.au) or (03) 8344 2639.

# Response to Issues Papers

## Issues Paper 1: Teacher quality and support

Universities can and do play a crucial role in improving teaching quality, support and supply in RRR areas and are a valuable resource and partner for Government in developing the Strategy. One such example of this is the University's **Network of Schools** model, a collaborative partnership led by the **Melbourne Graduate School of Education (MGSE)** that enables Victorian schools to learn from each other, the University and experts, about strategies to improve student learning.

University-led initiatives can also drive improvements in teacher quality and support in RRR areas. Such initiatives include **Rural Placement** included as part of the **Master of Teaching** offered by the **MGSE** and the **Clinical Teaching Practice in North East Arnhem Land** run in partnership with the Northern Territory Department of Education. Students who complete these placements report they are more open to working permanently in RRR areas after doing the placement.

However, more Teacher Candidates have applied for rural placements than the funding available to support them. The University welcomes the identification of **paid practicum** in RRR schools and recommends that the Australian Government commit to funding a paid practicum program as part of the Strategy. Such a program will enable more prospective teachers to gain experience in RRR schools and gain teaching placements.

Careers advice in schools is an important source of information and aspiration raising for students, wherever they are learning. The Issues Paper recommendations that focus on the need to lift the quality and availability of careers advice is supported. Initiatives could include visits and outreach by schools to nearby universities and other providers as part of the school program to advise students. The University runs a number of programs that work with school students to raise aspiration and demystify the university setting, which are outlined in our earlier submissions.

## Issues Paper 2 and 4: Additional places for regional university providers

The introduction of demand driven funding for domestic bachelor level places in 2012 succeeded in broadening access for groups that have been historically under-represented in Australia's higher education system. However, the demand driven system, while providing RRR students with greater choice of institution, has also seen metropolitan campuses increase enrolments as students in RRR locations chose to move to one of Australia's major cities to pursue post-secondary education.<sup>1</sup>

There is an opportunity to adopt a more managed approach to the demand driven system that would better support higher education delivery in rural, regional and remote areas. The University urges the Government to consider the introduction of 'funding envelopes' for the Commonwealth Grant Scheme (CGS). Under this approach, institutions would be allocated an amount for Commonwealth supported places, allowing them a degree of autonomy in distributing those places across course levels and between disciplines. Funding envelopes would provide a mechanism for increasing the share of places allocated to campuses, in a targeted way, outside of our major cities. This approach becomes more relevant now that the Government has frozen the demand driven system, with the proposal that growth to be negotiated via performance-based funding in the years ahead.

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<sup>1</sup> Cardak, B., Brett, M., Bowden, M., Vecchi, J., Barry, P., Bahtsevanoglou, J. and McAllister, R. (2017), *Regional Student Participant and Migration: Empirical analysis of factors influencing regional student participation and internal migration in higher education*, National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education: Curtin University. <https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Regional-Student-Participation-and-Migration-20170227-Final.pdf>

A system of CGS funding envelopes would also foster growth in sub-bachelor provision. The previous system of uncapped bachelor places sitting alongside a fixed allocation of sub-bachelor places had the effect of skewing enrolments towards bachelor programs. Under a system of funding envelopes, Commonwealth Supported Places could be distributed across course levels on the basis of student interest and aptitude, rather than on the basis of funding arrangements that prioritise certain types of courses.

In the absence of the introduction of funding envelopes, the University supports the Issues Paper suggestion of additional places for regional university providers, including for enabling and sub-bachelor courses, that are aligned with the teaching and research strengths of institutions, and to meet local needs. The Issues Paper notes these courses play a particularly important role in supporting pathways and meeting the education and training needs of RRR areas.

## Issues Paper 2: Pathways to VET and other learning

The Strategy should support RRR education providers to increase post-secondary education options for RRR learners. Post-secondary education providers are well-placed to help the Strategy achieve this aim, with numerous programs already offered in RRR areas. For example, the University offers both undergraduate and graduate courses at its agricultural and veterinarian campus at Dookie. However, learners have less access, choice and opportunities in RRR areas than in cities. To address this, the University recommends that the Strategy initiate a **collaborative mapping exercise** as outlined in the University's earlier submission to identify the disciplinary strengths and workforce training capacity of all RRR providers, and how educational pathways can be streamlined and promoted. This would require collaboration and contributions from VET and tertiary education providers, Australian, State/Territory and Local Governments, and industry to identify the strengths of a region's education and training providers and the local economy and how these might meet the needs of RRR learners.

## Issues Papers 2, 3 and 5: Equity and access

The University is committed to addressing financial disadvantage and provides financial support to enable learners to pursue post-secondary education, such as through the recently announced Hansen Scholarship Program.<sup>2</sup> The University supports many other scholarships and awards which enable in-need students, including RRR learners, to pursue post-secondary education at one of the University's campuses, both metropolitan and RRR alike. Additional Government resourcing will assist post-secondary education providers to expand current opportunities enabling more students to study.

Many of the University's efforts to help RRR students are supported by the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP). In its Issues Papers, the Advisory Group canvassed quarantining a component of HEPPP for RRR initiatives. The University detailed the numerous HEPPP-funded initiatives in its previous submission, with such critical programs as Access Melbourne and the Access Scholarships funding eligible RRR and non-Victorian students to pursue studies at the University. Quarantining HEPPP funding would therefore cut funding from non-RRR equity programs and undermine the overall purpose of HEPPP. The University urges the expansion of HEPPP to meet demonstrated need rather than quarantining a portion of HEPPP funding for RRR programs.

## Issues Paper 4: Attracting international students

Scholarships and more flexible work and migration pathways are possible tools that would attract additional international students to RRR areas and should be part of the Strategy's focus. However, the Strategy should aim to grow the post-secondary sector by building up capacity, course offerings and student supports that will attract additional international students, rather than by diverting the

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<sup>2</sup> <https://scholarships.unimelb.edu.au/hansen>

existing international student cohort to RRR areas. Students who choose to come to Australia are highly selective and their choice is informed by a variety of factors such as the strong reputation and ranking of Australian post-secondary institutions, the quality and availability of in-demand qualifications, and the presence of crucial student experience elements such as affordability, accommodation availability, a welcoming community and quality of life. Growing an international student market in RRR areas will require the identification and development of value propositions distinctive to institutions and locations. The market could also include the development of shared student experience programs between metropolitan and rural-based institutions to broaden the student experience and provide exposure to RRR Australia.

#### **Issues Paper 4: Building research capacity**

The University supports efforts to build research capacity in RRR areas. However, the Strategy should consider that each university is best placed to identify their own unique research strengths and areas in which they seek to build capacity, and with the opportunity to nominate for research funds that are already competitive and involve peer review. The Strategy should focus on the existing and emerging strengths of regional and metropolitan universities, and in allocating funding seek to promote partnerships between institutions to take advantage of these strengths. The University recommends future research infrastructure funding should remain connected with the NCRIS network and be consistent with the roadmap. Large national assets should be located where a critical mass of expertise and access exists or can be developed to ensure the best utilisation of the infrastructure. Further, a research peer review process to provide oversight must be included with any new grants program. Peer review is a feature of the Australian and international research system that ensures high quality, independent, efficient allocation of scarce resources, and contributes to Australian universities' high rankings.

#### **Issues Paper 6: RRR Education Commissioner and Strategy**

The University recommends the Strategy be overseen by a single body that is also responsible for overseeing other post-secondary education strategies, rather than a designated stand-alone Commissioner. Such a body – a Higher Education Commission – could include Commissioners responsible for specific priority areas of the education system such as RRR, and would complement the functions of the National School Resourcing Board. A Higher Education Commission would provide independent, expert advice to Government on higher education policy and funding.

Success of the Strategy can be measured by setting goals and targets that are reflective of the breadth and diversity of the post-secondary system, by integrating data from both universities and VET providers, and properly capturing new and different course models (such as micro-credentials). To do so, the University recommends the introduction of a unique student identifier for all post-secondary students (both higher education and VET), linking NAPLAN and PISA data with post-school data and workforce data. Such an identifier would aid the assessment of institutional performance and would enhance understanding of the study pathways taken in RRR and other areas. This approach would contrast with the current siloed approach to data collection which has a significant focus on bachelor-level performance.

The University reiterates its view that the Strategy should facilitate support for bespoke partnerships to expand educational offerings in RRR areas. Bespoke partnerships between rural-based education providers and other providers that leverage the capabilities, specialisations and unique features of the participating institutions are an efficient way to meet changing demands in the post-secondary sector. Partnership models can be diverse and involve community stakeholders and service providers beyond mainstream educational institutions, but also include those between metropolitan and rurally-based universities. They can promote partnerships offering alternative pathways into post-secondary learning.