

National Regional, Rural and Remote Education Strategy Framing Paper – IRU Response

The National Regional, Rural and Remote Education Strategy framing paper targets the need for Australians outside major population centres to gain tertiary education and training, whether vocational or higher education, to be confident of a successful working and personal life. Take up and completion is lower, especially for higher education qualifications, than in the major cities.

Regional rural and remote (RRR) students face particular challenges due to the fewer study and training options available locally. As the Paper explores, this leads to a set of inter-related challenges:

- how to provide as full a range of tertiary education delivered from RRR areas as possible (the Discussion Paper's Challenges A, E) ;
- supporting access to other education opportunities elsewhere whether through physical relocation or through distance provision using digital and other means (Challenges A, C); and
- ensuring students from RRR areas are supported in study with needed services and through income support (Challenges B, D).

The IRU response below is aligned to the challenges set out in the Discussion paper. Our major proposals for action are:

1. increase the university funding cap for all additional enrolments at RRR campuses;
2. target funding allocated for regional hubs to ensuring existing campuses function to their best, as well as to hubs;
3. create an RRR program to encourage and reward the enrolment and progress of students from RRR areas. The program would parallel the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) and Indigenous Support Program (ISP);
4. increase the minimum level of financial student support for those needing to live away from home;
5. use the next wave of research infrastructure investment to stimulate the whole Australian research system, intentionally hosting new infrastructure across many centres, distributing the positive spill-over effects of infrastructure; and
6. improve knowledge of education opportunities in RRR areas among potential international students.

IRU and regional delivery of higher education

The [IRU Contribution to Higher Education and Research in Regional Australia](#) shows that IRU educate 17% of Australia's regionally taught students, with 26% of IRU member students taught from regional campuses. We are a major contributor of research driven from regional campuses. IRU analyses consider regional delivery as all tertiary education outside the five large State capitals of Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide and Perth plus Canberra.

IRU members are present in many peri-urban areas with similar challenges to those which the RRR review targets. There may be aspects from its outcomes that should have broader application.

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Challenge A: There are fewer study options available in RRR areas

1. What opportunities exist to expand options for further study in RRR areas?
2. What potential is there for universities, vocational training providers and other service providers to better work together in RRR areas, including opportunities to expand service offerings and better support articulation between VET and higher education?

The nub of the challenge is that the spread of small towns and cities across RRR Australia does not lend itself easily to extensive local provision of university education and to a lesser extent VET provision.

At heart of the solution is to ensure that universities and other education providers have the capacity to give all their students the full set of education and student support. This is best achieved where funding is sufficient and additional programs are tied to broad indicators of RRR outcomes, not specific activities. Resources allow action.

Supporting universities to meet demand where it exists

Over the past decade universities have expanded provision from RRR campuses, supported by demand-driven funding. Students taught from regional based campuses increased by 33,000 over the 2011-2016 period, a 12% increase. This included an increase of 6,400 in regional campus delivery at IRU members, a 14% increase.

The setting of caps for Commonwealth Grants Scheme funding at the 2017 level means that growth in regional provision is set to stop, not due to lack of demand from capable students, but because universities will be funded less in future than now. Planned increases in the funding cap from 2020 will likely be less than inflation. The immediate challenge is not how to *expand* options but how to *maintain* current regional offerings and their quality.

The IRU opposes the Government's funding freeze. In the context of this review we target opening up funding for RRR campuses only, by leaving universities with a capped funding amount for provision in metropolitan campuses but gaining the extra funding equal to the growth in provision at RRR campuses. Such an approach is better than the Government's commitment to allocate additional places to some campuses. It lets universities respond to demand where it exists and avoids the Government picking which campuses should grow and the risk that not all new places will be taken up.

Action 1

Increase the funding cap for each university for growth in enrollments on RRR campuses.

Ensuring regional campuses and hubs work well

The Government has created regional hubs in a number of towns with the review considering the value of increasing their number.

The first focus must be to ensure the existing university campuses remain viable. Put simply, a university campus provides teaching, likely research, and an effective community base for the university to support the region. The role of research in creating a viable regional university or campus is important, with options for this explored below under Challenge E.

The regional hubs provide a secondary level of support to students enrolled in a university course. They are not providing teaching as part of the course. They supplement, but do not replace each university's teaching.

They can assist students from the region's local university or who are enrolled at any university by providing additional support and study advice and a place to meet with other students in the region. This could make study by distance more viable for some people.

The hub role is played by any campus across Australia – enrolled students will access university facilities across the country to suit their needs with little fuss from universities that only students enrolled with them should use facilities like libraries. Universities support services will target their own students.

Many university campuses in RRR areas are under pressure. The question for the Review is how to make best use of the funds for hubs including:

- whether some of those funds invested in an existing campus would achieve a better outcome; and
- to be clear which towns have sufficient likely students to sustain a hub.

Action 2

Target funding allocated for regional hubs to ensuring existing campuses function to their best, as well as to hubs.

Support mobility of students and staff between metropolitan and regional Australia

Universities which have campuses in both major metropolitan cities and in smaller cities and towns have potential to achieve scale through strategies to mobilise students and staff between their campuses. Internships and work integrated learning opportunities could also be used to encourage students to spend time in regional areas and campuses. Staff mobility from metropolitan to regional campuses helps expand the breadth of offerings on regional campuses, increasing the attractiveness of regional universities for domestic and international students. Better supporting regionally based staff to teach students in metropolitan areas (remotely) or on-campus (face-to-face), helps generate further economic activity in regional Australia and the attractiveness of working there.

Improving use of online delivery

The conundrum of online learning in the RRR context is that it best suits people well prepared for further study and can be a challenge for those less confident about their study needs and capabilities. Much postgraduate education uses online learning as its core with some face to face support, with 44% of domestic postgraduate completions in 2017 for such students.

To improve use by people less prepared for higher education the support around the form of study needs to be good. It is not a cheaper form of delivery when done effectively. Universities are pursuing technology-infused approaches that highlight the centrality of digital connectivity in supporting inter-regional education, allowing for improved levels of take up.

Effective use of digital delivery must be a very big part of the response to the regional and remote issue considering the challenge of providing sustainable face-to-face educational infrastructure to all areas.

It requires reliable internet access. This is not just a problem for higher education delivery but part of a broader problem which diminishes services available to those in RRR areas. Universities have been engaging in ways to minimize the effect of unequal access to high speed internet. For example, webinar technology (e.g. Zoom, WebEx) provides dynamic video quality, dependent on the internet bandwidth of the student. Phone-in access, while not desirable, provides access to those without adequate internet access. Universities are also developing their course materials and learning activities with external students in mind. Nevertheless, it is clear that without adequate access to high speed and affordable internet, the experiences of regional students will lag behind those of others into the future as the use of online teaching technology evolves.

Higher education and vocational education

There are numerous examples of shared facilities across educational sectors across Australia. The challenge to make these work is as much about Government requirements that limit the use of their own dollars in a shared resource, as constraints from the educational providers. An integrated facility should be that – with funding from all sources being used to the best overall effect.

Articulation and credit arrangements are a strong part of VET and university operations.

Action 3

Create an RRR program to encourage and reward the enrolment and progress of students from RRR areas. The additional funds would ease the implementation of new technology and services. The program would parallel the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) and Indigenous Support Program (ISP).

Challenge B: Relocating RRR students face significant financial, emotional and social challenges

3. What financial supports work best for students from RRR backgrounds, including those who choose to relocate?
4. What forms of support might be useful in helping students from RRR backgrounds to continue with their tertiary study?
5. How can universities assist RRR students to feel like they belong on their campus?
7. What practical steps can be taken to support RRR students who experience multiple forms of disadvantage?
8. How can we better support Indigenous people from RRR areas to access and succeed in tertiary education?

The financial cost for students living away from home is a major barrier. A tertiary education student living away from home has access to around \$550 per fortnight in combined Youth Allowance and Rent Assistance. This is roughly \$250 per fortnight more than a comparable student who lives at home and incurs far fewer expenses.

The financial cost for an adult looking to upskill while maintaining a home and potentially family is a different but equally challenging barrier.

Since many regional students need to relocate to access the course that is of best value to them, the inadequacy of the financial student support system has a disproportionate effect on regional students. The Rural and Regional Enterprise Scholarships Program is a positive initiative to improve regional student access to tertiary education, but is limited to STEM fields.

Student income support in Australia has long been tightly targeted and set at a level that is difficult for a person to live on for the period required to obtain a degree without significant support income from employment. The RRR aspect only adds to the problem. The provision of general supplements but targeted to students with the need to move is the best option available within the current income support system.

A temptation for Government is to transform additional payments into payments with subsequent income contingent based repayment. This serves to target a higher post-graduation repayment burden at people with greater need for support. It also puts pressure on the HELP system which is attacked for having too great a level of future repayments.

Action 4

Increase the minimum level of financial student support for those needing to live away from home.

Challenge C: Raising aspirations for tertiary education

6. What actions would help to raise aspirations and support informed career choices for students from RRR backgrounds?

A major requirement for the coming decade is to create a coherent tertiary education system that ensures each person has the opportunity and incentive to get the vocational and higher education qualifications, skills and knowledge to which they aspire.

The main proposition is quite simple. Young Australians need to complete school. They then need further qualifications and a means to access discrete, targeted sets of skills and knowledge as their future employment requires. Most are doing just this.

[The take up of tertiary education](#), an IRU analysis of the education outcome for young people between 15 and 25 from LSAY data shows that young people from metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas are equally likely to have completed a tertiary qualification but with major differences in the split between higher education and vocational education. By 25:

- 58% of young women in metropolitan areas have completed a higher education qualification compared to 45% of those from non-metropolitan areas; and
- 42% of young men in the cities have completed a higher education qualification compared to 25% in non-metropolitan areas.

In contrast VET completion is much higher. This leaves across Australia 23% of young men and 18% of young women without a tertiary qualification at age 25.

The use of digital links and services through school centres may assist careers and other advisors show the potential opportunities more effectively to young people in RRR areas. One example of this is the Regional Careers Hub Proposal being developed in Tamworth.

Challenge D: RRR often experience multiple forms of disadvantage

7. What practical steps can be taken to support RRR students who experience multiple forms of disadvantage?
8. How can we better support Indigenous people from RRR areas to access and succeed in tertiary education?

IRU members focus on inclusive education that supports students from all backgrounds with well-designed programs to attract and support them. These are supported by the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) which is driven by the number of low SES students, many of whom are from RRR locations. HEPPP has been part of a turn around in reducing disparity by socio economic background, but there has not been similar progress for students from RRR locations.

Over the same period Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander enrolments have grown more quickly than overall student numbers, supported through an enrolment and retention driven Indigenous Support Program (ISP).

A parallel program to HEPPP and ISP targeting enrolment of students from RRR locations could prove effective and supporting universities with the array of targeted services for such students. The emphasis of all such programs should be to provide incentive funding based on student numbers, but leave the activities to support students to each university.

The additional program would support universities to take up the array of specific services the review identifies to be encouraged. It addresses this challenge specifically and would assist address challenge A.

Action 3

Create an RRR program to encourage and reward the enrolment and progress of students from RRR areas. The program would parallel the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) and Indigenous Support Program (ISP).

Challenge E: Attracting people and jobs to RRR areas

9. How can tertiary education providers further stimulate economic growth in RRR areas?
10. What actions would further strengthen and increase the attractiveness of regional universities?
11. What policies would attract more metropolitan and international students to study at RRR areas, including regional universities and campuses?

The IRU aspiration is for a comparable standard of economic opportunities and community and education services across all parts of Australia.

Universities in outer metro and regional Australia are critical as educators of future professionals and stimulators of innovation through their research and engagement activities. IRU members lead the way in building these systems in their regions, but their long-term effectiveness requires a broader commitment to supporting and retaining knowledge workers and innovative businesses in regional Australia, underpinning a more diversified future Australian economy.

The IRU supports the Government's objective that all potential students (international and domestic) are alert to the value of studying in regional Australia. Increasing student enrolments in regional Australia has the potential to reduce the pressure on the major cities and stimulate vibrant, educated communities in regional Australia. This should be achieved through building capacity and attractiveness of regional areas for knowledge workers and building upon existing strengths, rather than directing students or graduates to particular destinations. This is best achieved through stronger investment by Government in technological and research infrastructure, supporting universities as leaders in their regional economies.

Building the research ecosystem

Supporting the regional university research mission and areas of research excellence are essential. Investment in Australian universities outside the major cities pushes each region towards the critical mass of researchers, innovators and students to live and remain there.

The IRU's [Building Regional Research Systems Across Australia](#) outlines the importance an effective research and innovation system, capable of supporting research, linking it to industry and other end users. For regional Australia, this requires that research is done by researchers who live there, that the research is relevant across the world, and the research addresses particular needs and characteristics of the region. Adequate research infrastructure is a cornerstone for this, but major research infrastructure developments are rarely deployed in regional and rural Australia.

The distribution of National Collaborative Research Infrastructure Strategy (NCRIS) infrastructure is a clear example of this. In 2018, less than one fifth of all NCRIS projects were located in regional cities or remote locations. The 2018 *National Research Infrastructure Census* outlines how use of NCRIS facilities is also concentrated amongst the metropolitan universities and a flow on effect for research quality. Most NCRIS facilities facilitate access to all universities at no cost or marginal cost, but regional researchers face additional costs of travelling to access facilities, as well as practical difficulties utilising the knowhow of NCRIS support staff. Some resources have a natural home, but where there is no intrinsic locational logic, a greater geographical disbursement would mean the spillover value of hosting major resources is better distributed.

Action 5

Use the next wave of research infrastructure investment to stimulate the whole Australian research system, intentionally hosting new infrastructure across many centres, distributing the positive spillover effects of infrastructure.

Attracting international students

The IRU supports the Government's objective that potential international students for Australia are alert to the value of studying at all of Australia's universities. There is a risk that the larger cities are better known, such that options for study elsewhere may not be given sufficient consideration.

There is a need to make better use of the potential from the breadth of the country to reduce the pressure on the major cities and create positive outcomes for all current and future Australians.

To ensure this, the IRU supports actions that will improve knowledge of the breadth of Australian universities and to stimulate vibrant, educated communities around all of our universities. The focus should be the value of each option, not to offset perceived weakness. Possible actions are:

- employing on-shore agent training and site visits to generate better knowledge of the education options available across the whole of Australia;
- stronger investment by Government in its coordinated national approach to promoting Australia, inclusive of all cities and institutions, as an education destination;
- stimulating research capability across all campuses as essential to vibrant, effective universities in any location.

There is no place for directing students to particular destinations, which would only have the negative impact of deterring students from coming to Australia at all. Amendments to the visa system to create incentives for students to study in particular locations could be considered but need to work with the broader immigration framework.

Action 6

Improve knowledge of education opportunities in RRR areas among potential international students.

Challenge F: Implementing and monitoring a national strategy

12. Would there be value in establishing a National Regional Education Commissioner to oversee the Strategy and, if so, what should their role be?

13. How should success be measured? What goals and targets, including for tertiary education attainment, should be considered both at a national and individual community level?

The IRU supports the Government creating a national strategy that elucidates its key targets and actions to improve tertiary outcomes for people in RRR areas. One aspect to a strategy should be to take the opportunity for stronger research about the impact of specific interventions, particularly studies involving randomized control trials or control groups.

Comparison of outcomes for RRR areas with those from metropolitan areas provides one set of potential measures. An expectation for equivalence may be suitable place to start the analysis but in each case the relevance to the RRR areas needs consideration.

An unequal balance between higher education and vocational education across regions or other sub-populations is not an inherently negative outcome if the broader tertiary education system is working effectively. Aspiration towards vocational education over higher education may reflect well-informed career choices based on personal interests and regional economic opportunities. If the National Regional, Rural and Remote Education Strategy intends to set targets, they ought to be tertiary education oriented with a focus on the national challenge of reducing the number of people with no post school qualification.

The IRU does not support establishing a National Regional Education Commissioner. The need for such a position to implement the strategy is not clear.

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