

DASSH Response to the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education (Commonwealth of Australia 2017)

The Australasian Council of Deans of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities (DASSH) welcomes the consideration in this Discussion Paper of key issues, challenges, opportunities and barriers that impact upon the learning outcomes of regional, rural and remote students in Australia. The focus of DASSH's submission is on challenges that regional, rural and remote students face beyond school and especially in the transition to university and other tertiary study.

Several excellent case studies are provided in the report; inspiring in some instances. There are, of course, many more across STEM and ASSH areas that could be included in those case studies.

6.1 Curriculum

While DASSH supports the introduction of the Australian National Curriculum, it must be acknowledged that regional, rural and remote students, if they wish to remain local, are faced with considerably reduced choices than many city counterparts in terms of choice of school, school subject choices, and choice of tertiary study provider. The restricted choices available for regional, rural and remote students affect the capacity to support students with a disability, gifted and talented students and those who speak English as an additional language. Universities can (and have) had a role to play in assisting regional, rural and remote schools with the provision of face to face and online expertise and increased subject choice, for instance, in extension mathematics and in languages. Through schemes like NALSSP (National Asian Languages and Studies in Schools Program) the federal government has been a key facilitator of language provision by universities into regional, rural and remote schools, both through direct provision of expertise and training of pre-service teachers and through retraining and professional development of in-service teachers. As the curriculum and the marketplace change (for example, through advances in technology), that flexibility of assisted provision through partnership for regional, rural and remote students and schools needs to be maintained.

We acknowledge the significant difference in educational achievements of students from regional, rural and remote Australia compared to city peers in both NAPLAN and ATAR scores [this Report, p. 15] and overall reading and mathematics literacy scores as noted also in the 2016 OECD report. We also acknowledge that, although improvements have been made in school Year 12 retention and completion, this remains a barrier in many regional, rural and remote communities; and of those in the 24-34 year age bracket, over 42% based in our cities will hold a degree while under 20% will hold a degree qualification in regional, rural and remote communities (Universities Australia, 2015). Regional, rural and remote location must therefore be acknowledged as a major factor of disadvantage in both secondary and tertiary educational outcomes.

6.2 Teachers and teaching

DASSH supports the national development and implementation of the *Accreditation of Initial Teacher Education Programs in Australia: Standards and Procedures* which has set out high level requirements to ensure that all initial teacher graduates meet the requirements of the graduate career stage of the *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers*. DASSH strongly supports the development of high quality teachers in all STEM and ASSH fields. Teaching is a profession that requires both specialist content training, in two areas for most trainee secondary school teachers, and an array of generalist skills. Universities across Australia provide specialised training that enables pre-service teachers and in-service teachers to attain those outcomes especially in regional, rural and remote schools.

Many of our pre-service student teachers have compulsory placements in regional, rural and remote areas but retaining them in those areas as a highly skilled workforce is problematic: additional incentives (federal and state) may be needed. Even more critical to long term success is a sustainable support network, online and face to face, for pre-service and in-service teachers based in regional, rural and remote communities.

DASSH does not support the suggestion in the Report of a mandated full school term regional, rural and remote practicum for pre-service teachers. The benefits to the students, communities and schools of such as extended placement are outweighed by the risks of social isolation, high cost and the burden on both Universities and regional, rural and remote schools, many already under resourced, to supervise for an extended period.

6.3 Leadership in schools

Universities have a significant role to play in provision of professional development and further diploma, graduate certificate, Masters and doctoral qualifications for aspiring leaders in regional, rural and remote schools. Many tertiary leadership qualifications can be obtained fully online or in blended mode of delivery or through intensive blocks delivered during school holidays, all of which enable aspiring leaders and school principals to remain in full time employment in schools.

6.4 School and community

Economic disadvantage at the individual and community levels in many regional, rural and remote communities can make attempts to do anything outside the core school curriculum extremely difficult. Nonetheless, community factors beyond the school gate are significant determinants of educational engagement for remote, rural and regional schools. Tertiary providers currently work closely with regional, rural and remote schools to create opportunities to build positive school and community relationships. Examples include jointly hosted events in science and engineering, local history, local geography, Indigenous studies and in the visual, performing and creative arts. Often, however, these end up being 'feel good', one-off events. DASSH would encourage regional, rural and remote schools and tertiary partners to document partnership activities and set progress and achievement goals to provide evidence to evaluate whether partnerships are having an impact on improving outcomes for students: such an evidence base may also help make a case for the activity to be further funded and sustained by government, local council or the philanthropic sector. Investment in evaluation of such initiatives can enhance the capacity for successful programs and partnerships to be taken up more widely.

6.5 Information and Communication Technology

With access to AARNET, universities in regional, rural and remote communities have long had the benefit of high speed internet. As the NBN Co. rolls out high speed access to schools and homes, this will diminish as an area of inequity. However, DASSH acknowledges that ICT teacher expertise lags behind resources and delivery. ICT and digital research skills are regarded as core competencies for many ASSH graduates and universities can also assist with in-service teacher professional development and upskilling in this area.

6.6 Entrepreneurship and school

Entrepreneurship is gaining currency in our schools and universities. While this can be perceived as an acknowledgement that many of our school and tertiary graduates will not easily find jobs; on the other hand, it recognises that we need to give students the skills to create their own employment opportunities. Those skills to which ASSH disciplines contribute most strongly include creativity, critical thinking, teamwork and independent learning. While entrepreneurship in a school

environment is relatively 'safe', we also need to build in incentivisation, perhaps through school and tertiary student start-up grants, as well as a recognition and acceptance of high failure rates in start-up enterprises.

6.7 Improving access to education

It is unlikely that new schools, TAFE centres and universities will be opened in our regional, rural and remote communities. Access barriers remain strong: for university study these include costs of enrolment, cost of resources, cost of travel and, for those students who need to move closer to a university campus, the high cost of rental or residential expenses, especially in capital cities. It should also be acknowledged that for many regional, rural and remote tertiary students, among them school leavers, university or TAFE study prepares them for a second career as they hold down existing jobs and, therefore, study part time. While flexible study, much of it online, is a partial solution, school leavers, especially in regional, rural and remote communities, can benefit from the face to face peer social and learning environment. A variety of access pathways therefore needs to be maintained.

6.8 Diversity: learning needs of students

University students are increasingly notifying staff of learning, physical and mental health disabilities. Providing additional and appropriate support is an ongoing and increasing challenge. This is an even greater challenge for regional, rural and remote universities, where access to resources and skilled personnel can be difficult. These issues also apply to regional, rural and remote schools, and so ensuring that the increasingly diverse population of pre-service and in-service teachers has appropriate training and confidence to respond to these support needs is a current challenge for Universities as well as schools.

Both our schools and tertiary providers need to improve educational outcomes for ATSI students as identified in the Prime Minister's Closing the Gap Report, and while positive steps have been made to increase Year 12 retention and completion by Indigenous students (and teachers in regional, rural and remote schools have played a critical role), universities have struggled to attract and retain significantly larger Indigenous student cohorts. Universities, and especially ASSH disciplines, have a key role to play to ensure that pre-service and in-service teachers have appropriate training in cultural sensitivity and awareness.

6.9 Transitioning beyond school

Transitioning from school to tertiary study is a major life decision. At our city campuses we see many first-in-family university students, often from outer metropolitan areas: such students often struggle to succeed in their first year of study. In regional, rural and remote areas this context can be more common and more acute. Students need access to academic and social support networks and, just as importantly, access to family, academic and community role models. Such role modelling can start early. Programs such as Children's University Australia in South Australia, NSW mid north-coast and Tasmania partner universities with disadvantaged school communities in order to provide enhanced extra-curricular activities for school students and to get them thinking early about tertiary options. Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) funding remains critical to improving access and participation in undergraduate education for students from low SES backgrounds; many of them from regional, rural and remote communities.

Existing means tested payment schemes such as Austudy, ABSTUDY and youth allowance are essential for many tertiary students, but there are also many school leavers, especially from farming communities, where the mechanisms of means testing exclude them from financial support from the

government without providing an alternative for them to support their studies. Many regional, rural and remote school leavers are therefore forced to delay entry to university.

Rural and Regional Enterprise Scholarships in STEM and health studies should be expanded to cover targeted ASSH disciplines and teacher education: qualifications and expertise, for example, in local history, ecotourism, leadership, law, Indigenous knowledges, digital archive management, media studies, and land management can better support students to return to jobs in regional, rural and remote areas. If students are to be encouraged to stay local, or to return to regional, rural and remote communities, then clear pathways from school to tertiary studies to local career/work options need to be established and supported. A variety of pathways and choice of schools, tertiary providers and career options is critical and should include transition to work and trainee schemes as well as priority placements in regional, rural and remote communities for regional, rural and remote students.

Likewise, choice in accommodation for regional, rural and remote university students is important. Residential colleges and halls of residence, often based on or near campus, provide strong social and academic support for school leavers transitioning to tertiary study, but are too costly for many students and their families. Private sector housing is an option but also can be expensive in regional, rural and remote areas where income from local industry drives up rental prices and demand. University-private partnership enterprise can result in residential 'villages' that can create supportive communities for local regional, rural and remote students as well as international and interstate students.

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About DASSH

The Australasian Council of Deans of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities (DASSH) is the authoritative agency on research, teaching and learning for the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities (ASSH) in Australian and New Zealand universities.

DASSH supports those within these institutions who have responsibility for the governance and management of research and teaching and learning in their universities. DASSH also supports those who aspire to these positions through a Network of Associate Deans (Learning and Teaching) and a Network of Associate Deans (Research).