



# Response to ACOLA Discussion Paper: Enhancing Research in Australia's Regional, Rural and Remote Universities

## 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 Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences (HASS) 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. DASSH also supports those who aspire to these positions through a Network of Associate Deans (International), a Network of Associate Deans (Learning and Teaching) and a Network of Associate Deans (Research).

## Introduction

DASSH membership includes the vast majority of universities in Australia including those based in Regional, Rural and Remote (RRR) locations as well as those metropolitan institutions which have satellite campuses in RRR locations. In responding to this discussion paper, DASSH emphasises that consideration should be given to the experiences of researchers, staff and students working at both types of institution. While there are certain differences in management and administrative systems, regionally based scholars employed by metropolitan institutions share many of the structural challenges faced by those employed by RRR-based universities.

In addition, we support and endorse the submission of the Regional Universities Network (RUN) to this discussion paper. The RUN submission highlights the fundamental contributions of regional universities to local, regional and national economies, a point which highlights the value of their research contributions, including research partnerships, industry connections, PhD supervision, and potential research impact in these places and for specific populations.

## Question 1: What does research success look like for universities in RRR areas?

Research success in RRR universities mirrors research success in metropolitan universities. Successful research activities in all locations should result in scholarly, public and commercial engagement at local, national and international levels. Researchers should contribute to the development of new knowledge and innovation in practice in areas that are both specific to their universities and their contexts, and non-specific and relevant to wider audiences and populations. In essence, while there is a need for RRR universities to engage with their local communities and to address local needs, DASSH members believe that metropolitan universities share this obligation. Research success in RRR and metropolitan universities relies on broadly the same inputs and outputs regardless of the differences in the needs of the communities they serve.

Yet despite the shared overarching goals, there are constraints on RRR universities which mean that their research activities can be reduced. The impact of these constraints can be seen in the ARC's Excellence in

Research for Australia and Engagement and Impact exercises. Lower staffing levels, financial constraints (as a result of smaller student intakes) and difficulty in accessing research and other infrastructure can make it difficult for RRR researchers to achieve and maintain a level of research activity in line with those based at metropolitan universities. Case studies from regional campuses of metropolitan universities indicate that research activity by RRR researchers may be approximately 10% lower than their metropolitan colleagues<sup>1</sup>.

Specific case studies from institutions highlight these points. For example, La Trobe University defines success as having research performance in the regional campuses within 10% of Bundoora on key research metrics. In other words, success would mean that it would be difficult to discern performance gaps between staff on regional campuses and those on the metropolitan campus. The institution sees a gap in research performance – staff on the regional campuses have fewer outputs, win fewer funds and have lower impact. However, it is not of a very significant magnitude. The major hinderance for estimating gaps in research performance for this institution is the dominance of Bundoora, in terms of staffing numbers, over the regional campuses. Only 11% of La Trobe’s HASS researchers are based in RRR campuses, making comparisons potentially problematic.

Southern Cross University considers scholarly and public engagement to occur at local, national and international levels. It also encourages collaboration with industry, including the cultural industries, again at local, national and international levels. Yet interestingly, the development of new knowledge and innovation in practice in areas that are both specific to RRR universities and their contexts, and non-specific and more universally relevant.

At Deakin, the institution fosters research that responds to community/regional needs and delivers solutions and socio-cultural benefit. For example, the work being conducted through the Centre for Regional and Rural Futures includes projects that explore the conditions necessary to enable political legitimacy for climate change adaptation research within agricultural bureaucracies<sup>2</sup>. The same might be said of La Trobe University with its ‘Centre for the Inland’ research focus. While not formally classified as a ‘regional university’, the University of Newcastle has more than one campus including some staff clustered on the Central Coast. Different research opportunities are presented by the proximity of social science staff and specialisations, such as social research and the human services.

## **Question 2: What role does research excellence play in the overall success of universities in RRR areas?**

Research excellence is critical to the overall success of RRR universities, as it is for the success of metropolitan universities. Research excellence strengthens the reputations of RRR universities and campuses, enhances the connectivity to community stakeholders and attracts students, including postgraduate and research higher degree students.

The primary difference between RRR and metropolitan universities in this regard and others is scale and sensitivity to change. The benefits of instances of research excellence can be amplified in RRR institutions as its impact on the local community may be comparatively large and well publicised, potentially attracting public interest, local investment and students. In many cases, this increased engagement builds from a ‘low base’

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<sup>1</sup> This figure is anecdotal only and should not be considered statistically significant.

<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.deakin.edu.au/about-deakin/people/robert-faggian>

(in comparison with large, metropolitan universities) and can result in substantial benefits to the RRR university. Low levels of research excellence, engagement or activity have a similarly amplified effect in RRR universities and campuses, as they can fall victim to a vicious cycle of reduced research reputation leading to reduced community engagement, resulting in lower student enrolments having a detrimental effect on the ability of the institution to invest in research activity. Again, specific institutional examples/experiences signal the role of research excellence.

Research excellence ratings arguably strengthen the reputation of the regional campus, enhance the connectivity to community stakeholders, and attract students, including postgraduate candidates. The virtuous cycles of research reputation, community engagement and student participation are particularly evident in smaller centres. The experience of the Bendigo campus provides a good example of this working. The tangible benefits it brings is more visible more swiftly in regional settings. Equally, when research is not strong and/or not engaged with community it has a counterproductive effect. This point was echoed by other RRR institutions offering feedback for this submission.

### **Question 3: What strategies have been implemented to boost research excellence in RRR universities? What has and has not worked?**

We contend that RRR universities and universities with RRR campuses generally develop research strategy documents unique to their circumstances. Therefore, DASSH recommends the authors of the ACOLA discussion paper refer directly to such university documents, most of which highlight the need for regional impact, industry connections and partners, and an increase in research excellence ratings and external research funding.

One example is La Trobe University's development of a Regional Research Plan in 2017 (currently under review). The Shepparton Research Network aims to bring together staff and graduate students with industry professionals from businesses, government and community organisations researching in and about Shepparton and the Goulburn Valley region. The regional plans focus on building collaborations, partnerships and engagement, with the advantage of focusing research on local issues but this also can tend to constrain staff from pursuing a broader research focus. More deliberately, at Deakin, top-up scholarships have been used to attract PhD students to regional campuses, which makes for a more (financially) attractive proposition for students.

It is also true that some universities with strong HASS faculties have benefitted from good Faculty-based research schemes, including the University of Newcastle which has fostered ECR, MCR women and research through competitive funds disbursed via Faculty schemes. ARC Linkage Grants in development at one stage received pilot funding. The Faculty invites external to review schemes, applicants and outcomes, and places emphasis on supportive grant writing and identifying next-generation researchers. ARC Discovery Project, Future Fellowship and Discovery Early Career Researcher Award applicants are promised top-up funds, post-award workload relief, and other incentives.

#### **Question 4: How can universities in RRR areas best address the ‘breadth versus depth’ challenge described above, with particular consideration to attracting and retaining high-calibre staff?**

The discussion paper correctly identifies ‘breadth versus depth’ as a significant challenge facing RRR universities and campuses. This challenge is especially prominent for those faculties which offer Bachelor of Arts (BA) degrees; degrees which draw much of their appeal from their breadth. Financial and staffing restrictions make it impossible for comparatively small RRR institutions to offer the breadth of disciplines available at larger metropolitan institutions. As a result, BA degrees taught at RRR universities or campuses may fall short of student expectations and suffer reputational damage, reduced enrolments and reduced income for expenditure on research and teaching.

While specialisation in a limited number of disciplines (adding ‘depth’) can offer a solution to the problem of achieving a critical mass of staff in a given discipline, faculties teaching the BA must also maintain a range of specialties diverse enough to satisfy student expectations. The solution in some institutions has been to reduce student offerings in RRR locations or, for those with metropolitan campuses, to exclusively offer certain programs in RRR locations. Such offerings should be carefully selected with consideration given to the needs and aspirations of the local community.

In other institutions, there is a strong desire to maintain a breadth of studies in order to maintain a collection of enrolment options that can support a wide range of student aspirations and adapt to changing research priorities and student demands.

HASS disciplines face a particular challenge in that we are expected to provide a BA teaching curriculum to a relatively small student cohort. Given that the most appealing element of the BA – its breadth – is impossible to deliver it creates a cycle of disappointed students. As a consequence, RRR institutions are unable to specialise in niche areas that might be better positioned to develop critical mass for research. Specialisation would be a good approach, but it is particularly problematic for HASS disciplines due to the link to teaching and need to have a broad offering. However, one strategy may be to have exclusively regional offerings, where quality specialist staff can be attracted, and research performance can be consolidated: for example, La Trobe University Bendigo’s Visual Arts and Planning and Community Development programs. These groups are highly successful in terms of output and engagement and their strength is in large part based on their connection to community and being uniquely offered on regional campus.

Other institutions report that breadth in research areas in RRR Universities is often reduced as a function of reduction in student demand for some areas. Being able to ‘weather’ temporary reduced demand and thus retain and even attract staff in key research areas is vital. Therefore, universities should be incentivised, through funding structures, to support areas of research strength or value with or without keen student demand.

Another potential approach is to reward cross-disciplinary and cross-institutional research programs and teams via the ARC and other funding sources. This would allow RRR institutions to secure both breadth and depth, but in relation to a specific problem or issue identified in the relevant community. Given RRR institutions often lack the capacity to do everything, the obvious approach is to collaborate effectively with other institutions with complementary research capabilities. The challenge is for the institution to strategically

determine the areas where they will get the best return for their investment, which will need to give due consideration to the community needs.

### **Question 5: What steps can be taken to increase the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research workforce, and encourage research on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and issues?**

DASSH advocates a new focus on the development of career development fellowships that lead from HDR to post-doctoral roles, and on to higher level, ongoing positions. In HASS disciplines (and others) the competitive nature of the labour market means that the structural disadvantage of Indigenous people is magnified making it extremely difficult for staff to secure academic roles. Active steps need to be taken to overcome these structural problems and dedicated career development programs are vital to do this. It is critical to maintain close relationships with local Indigenous communities, from consulting on curriculum development to encouraging input into project planning and research activities. RRR institutions tend to have strategies to recruit and retain Indigenous students and staff, but this is a competitive arena, with metropolitan universities also aiming to do the same.

There is evidence of growing research capability around themes relevant to Indigenous communities. While universities (in all areas) can offer various scholarships and programs to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, a major challenge seems to be finding individuals who have the qualifications required to prepare them for these opportunities. DASSH agrees that more needs to be done at high school level to help ensure enough supply of Indigenous Australians into the University system.

### **Question 6: How can universities in RRR areas better engage with local Indigenous communities through research?**

It is not only vital for universities to have strong engagement with RRR communities, but those communities need to be actively brought into the research process. This is especially important in the case of Indigenous communities, many of which have had negative experiences with academics, for example where research has been exploitative, reductive or otherwise unrepresentative of Indigenous perspectives. In particular, it is crucial that consultation occurs at every step of the research process, and ideally, include Indigenous researchers, organisations and/or community groups as collaborators. Indeed, the most important and effective way to strengthen this engagement is via research led by Indigenous communities so that knowledge addressing genuine concerns may be produced through genuine collaboration. Such collaborations may assist in countering assumptions that Indigenous communities add value to only a limited range of research areas, primarily environmental conservation and socio-cultural matters specific to Indigenous peoples. Although these topics may be of interest to some Indigenous people and communities, it would be a mistake to assume that Indigenous Australians cannot, and would not like to, add value to other research areas.

### **Question 7: What barriers exist to universities in RRR areas improving their research outcomes?**

RRR universities and campuses operate within economies that are smaller and, in most cases, far less diverse than their metropolitan counterparts. The types of industry most commonly found in RRR areas have heavy agricultural or resources foci, and while cultural industries and infrastructure are sometimes available, they are rarely of the size or prominence of those found in more highly urbanised centres. Partially as a result of the reduced diversity of opportunities available in RRR centres, RRR universities can have difficulty in



attracting and retaining high-performing and ambitious researchers, many of whom are drawn to larger institutions and/or metropolitan areas, particularly if they have partners or families.

Further to what we may term 'cultural isolation', researchers based in RRR campuses also face geographical isolation which can hinder the development and maintenance of collaborative relationships with colleagues in metropolitan institutions who may be able to assist in providing expertise and resources that would improve the RRR researcher's prospects (and, it should be noted, vice-versa). Despite technological advances, face-to-face meetings remain the most effective means of building relationships, and for researchers based in RRR areas, the costs and time required to attend such meetings can prove prohibitive.

DASSH agrees that the main problem for RRR HASS faculties is having enough resources to staff enough academics in regional campuses. Teaching viability is necessary to sustain research capacity but due to the relatively small catchment of RRR universities it can be difficult to sustain sufficient numbers of staff to create and maintain a viable cohort for research. The other is keeping regional staff connected to their metropolitan collaborators both in terms of being part of an academic community but also having access to resources, support and development.

The most acute barrier is that student load cross-subsidises research and allows for exponential growth. The RRR universities and campuses do not have substantial student load, and government subsidies only partly ameliorate that situation. These could also include reduced funding opportunities (from both national grant schemes and through less local industry funding), inadequate facilities (and a lack of access to appropriate facilities within a reasonable travel distance), a lack of collaborative opportunities (or at least more travel/time impost to realise collaborative opportunities), poorer IT services and telecommunications in many RRR areas, seasonal/climatic impacts on research income (e.g. reduced Research Development Corporation levy income during droughts, and broader reduced income in RRR areas during droughts), and in general, the tyranny of distance, which makes all activities more challenging.

#### **Question 8: Are there perverse incentives that negatively impact research outcomes in RRR universities?**

DASSH is not aware of any large scale, systematic, perverse incentives that consistently have negative impacts on research outcomes at RRR universities, though such incentives certainly arise in particular circumstances at individual institutions. In some universities, for example, the financial incentive to increase overall enrolments by prioritising courses that are reliably in high demand (e.g. Nursing or Education) can act as a disincentive to invest in research capacity outside of those associated with the in-demand courses. As a result, research capacity is limited in breadth and not necessarily aligned with the interests of local industries or communities.

#### **Question 9: What opportunities exist for universities in RRR areas to pursue research excellence and impact?**

The small scale of regional communities and their particular needs means that, with appropriate consultation and collaboration, the impact of research projects can be particularly strong. The challenge is aligning the needs of the regional communities with university expertise. In reality, the drivers of research excellence are often things that are ad hoc, reliant on luck and/or dominated by metropolitan considerations, especially when related to teaching decisions. Work to improve that alignment could be quite effective in increasing research excellence and impact.



DASSH believes that RRR universities are highly community-engaged: therefore, research funding and assessment structures that support, encourage and actively foster community-engaged research would be of great benefit. We can look to the better embeddedness of UK and European regional universities in the cultures and histories of their towns, and the more systematic engagement with relevant industries and communities. Government financial levers (e.g. tax concessions) will also be important considerations here.

### **Question 10: What are some examples of strong collaborations between industry and universities in RRR areas? What has and has not worked?**

DASSH encourages the authors of this discussion paper to refer directly to the information provided by RRR universities and campuses in seeking examples of collaborations between industry and universities in RRR areas. As an example, the links between some degree programs and city councils and broader communities have been hugely beneficial to both sides. These arrangements enable research projects with direct impact, teaching opportunities and some planned industry-linked doctoral students or programs. Some programs based on regional campuses have strong links to the GLAM (Galleries, Libraries, Archives and Museums) sector which are facilitating and consolidating research opportunities and outcomes.

Industry-university relationships in RRR areas tend to be stronger and last longer than in larger cities. Both parties are more highly incentivised to ensure the relationship works, as there are few or no alternatives if it collapses. There are many local examples of companies that have formed strong relationships with their local university, which manifest in either strong informal relationships (most often the case for small companies) to more structured governance arrangements (e.g. Memorandums of Understanding) for larger entities. There are numerous examples of these.

Forced collaboration is ill-advised but approaches to incentivise collaboration can often be effective. This could include small grant schemes, additional scholarships attached to industry collaborations, individual internal KPI's to incentivise staff to generate new collaborations, etc. One Commonwealth scheme that has been particularly successful is the Innovation Connections scheme which incentivises small Research and Development collaborations between Small-Medium Enterprises and universities. In short, any scheme that provides additional leverage to the collaborators will be viewed favourably, and particularly those schemes that are easy to access, have quick decision/funding allocation processes, and a reasonably high success rate.

One current scheme that offers substantial promise, but has still not fully delivered, is the CRC-P scheme. The main reason for the lack of impact is the very low funding success rate, which acts as a disincentive for industry to engage in such a scheme.

### **Question 11: How can government policy facilitate universities in RRR areas to boost their research excellence and impact?**

RRR members of DASSH agree that the most significant determinant of research excellence and impact in their institutions is the availability and reliability of funding for research activities, as well as the underlying financial sustainability of RRR campuses.

Some members highlight student enrolments as an important factor in ensuring financial security for their institutions, and support shifts in government policy to increase student incentives to enroll and complete



tertiary studies at RRR campuses. For example, the measures outlined in the recent National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy (<https://docs.education.gov.au/node/53035>) were well-received by DASSH members, and DASSH would welcome their implementation.

A number of DASSH members also advocated for dedicated funding pools to be created for research in RRR universities and campuses. Such funding could be distributed through schemes administrated by the Australian Research Council (ARC) or a government department and require that one or more of the Chief Investigators be based at a RRR campus for the duration of the project. An alternative suggestion was that the ARC reserve a proportion of the funding for its existing schemes for RRR-based applicants, although it is not clear that such a move would be in line with the principles of the assessment procedures of those schemes.

Finally, members recommended that, in recognition of the fact that researchers in RRR universities and campuses operate in research environments that are distinct from those of their metropolitan counterparts, a new, multi-tiered funding system that accounts for differences in the academic environments of RRR and metropolitan universities may be appropriate.

### Concluding remarks

DASSH recognises the vital role of RRR universities and campuses and supports ACOLA's current project aiming to enhance research excellence in such institutions. DASSH members are uniquely placed to understand the relationship between research excellence, teaching, and public engagement. None of these activities can be considered in isolation and in an ideal setting, each one should complement the others. We encourage the authors of this discussion paper to frame their investigation with this understanding in mind.