Outpost Consulting

Research into support services for tertiary students in RRR areas

Final Report

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Disclaimer

This report has been prepared to provide advice to the Department of Education, Skills and Employment as requested in Approach to Market provided to Outpost Consulting in May 2021. The information and commentary contained within have been prepared from publicly available material and from discussions held with key stakeholders. Outpost Consulting has provided this advice solely for the benefit of the Department of Education, Skills and Employment and it should not be relied upon for any other purpose.

Contents

1 Executive summary

1.1 Introduction

This report explores the range of support services that Australian tertiary providers currently deliver to students from regional, rural and remote (RRR) areas and provides advice to the Department of Education, Skills and Employment (DESE) on ways to ensure the delivery of ongoing best practice support services. The project comprised extensive desk research, conducted during phase 1 and consultation with a wide range of tertiary sector stakeholders.

Consultation included conversations with tertiary regulators, peak bodies, networks and interviews with sixty-seven public and private tertiary education providers. Seventy tertiary students were also consulted through interviews and focus groups.

Along with this report, the project has produced a Good Practice Framework (the Framework). The Framework provides guidance for tertiary providers to assist them in supporting RRR students. It is designed to encourage reflection on current practice and knowledge sharing within and between tertiary providers.

1.2 Analysis of current supports

The research found that many providers, particularly regional providers where the majority of the student body from RRR areas are enrolled, are doing an excellent job of proactively supporting and including RRR students. However, the effort is patchy across the diverse range of providers in the tertiary sector, and many are looking for new ideas and approaches to bolster their responses and better support student success.

Good practice for improving support services for RRR tertiary students was identified in desk research and through consultation activities. Themes that arose from the research and consultation underpin the Framework and are described in five elements:

1. **Culture** – which addresses the way that support for RRR students is built into the educational institution and how it is valued within the institution's functions.
2. **Resourcing** – which focuses on the products and services that are available to support the needs of RRR students, these include financial assistance, wellbeing support, academic support and accommodation assistance.
3. **Belonging** – which is concerned with how RRR students are made to feel integrated, affiliated and comfortable to participate in academic and social life.
4. **Engagement** – which considers whether RRR students are aware of the support services available to them and the ways they can interact with those services.
5. **Knowledge** – which pertains to how knowledge is developed and used to improve services for RRR students, including through monitoring student needs and the impact of support services and prioritising resources and funding.

Consultation with tertiary providers and stakeholders also identified broader policy issues that impact on the tertiary education experiences of RRR students. These were:

- Pathways and preparation

- Support services in regional locations
- Regulation
- Resourcing

1.3   Framework dissemination

The Framework developed through this project is designed to support knowledge sharing within and between providers. It includes examples of practice and resources that are intended to inspire reflection and encourage addition, elaboration and ongoing improvement – and thus contributing to improvements in practice by tertiary education providers.

Dissemination of the Framework to target users must therefore encourage active discussion and opportunities for connection between providers. A community of practice approach is recommended as the most constructive way to realise the benefits of the Framework.

To support its use as a resource for driving improvements in practice, the Framework will also require an online 'home' and an appropriate organisation or network to take ownership of its ongoing evolution as a structure for organising guidance, examples and practical tools.

The office of the Regional Education Commissioner is well-placed to drive the dissemination and use of the Framework through co-ordinated and co-operative activity with key stakeholders.

1.4   Issues for consideration

Issues identified through the project impact on how effectively tertiary providers can support RRR students. Through the research and consultation, a range of areas emerged where the Department may wish to consider taking action that will improve and expand the support services available to RRR tertiary students.

The issues for consideration by the Department are identified throughout this report and compiled in Section 7.

2   Introduction

2.1   Background

The 2019 report of the National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy (the Napthine Review) highlighted a clear city-country divide in participation and attainment rates for tertiary education. It found that RRR students face additional challenges transitioning to post-secondary education and often need additional support, particularly those who are relocating and face barriers related to cost and social dislocation.[1] But the challenges don't end once the student enrols in post-secondary education. Completion rates after commencing a VET or higher education course are significantly lower for RRR students, and the more remote the location of the student's home, the more likely they will not complete. The Napthine Review concluded that RRR students require support at all stages of the student lifecycle from pre-access through to completion and employment.[2]

Since the release of the Napthine Review there have been several significant changes to support for under-represented and equity groups in tertiary education with the introduction of the Job-Ready Graduates package. These include:

- a Tertiary Access Payment (TAP) which helps eligible regional students with the cost of moving to study
- demand-driven funding to provide guaranteed places for Indigenous students from regional Australia
- additional Commonwealth Grants Scheme (CSG) funding for regional university campuses
- strengthening and expansion of the Regional University Centre (RUC) network
- a fare allowance to support travel costs for the mid-year break for eligible RRR students in their first year of study
- reform of equity funding to provide RRR students with support through the Higher Education and Partnerships Program (HEPPP)
- research grants for regional universities to develop infrastructure which will support regional communities
- appointment of a Regional Education Commissioner to oversee and coordinate the implementation of the National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy..

2.2   This research

Recommendation 3 of the Napthine Review aims to improve the quality and range of student support services for RRR students to address the challenges of transition and higher rates of attrition. This project is particularly relevant to Action 13, which relates to identifying and disseminating information on a core suite of best practice interventions and offerings tertiary providers should provide to regional, rural and remote students.

Outpost Consulting was commissioned by the Department of Education, Skills and Employment (the Department) to identify best practice student support services, focussing on RRR students, and prepare materials suitable for disseminating to tertiary providers to increase institutional awareness of best practice supports.

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[1] Commonwealth of Australia (2019) *National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy*, (Napthine Review) p.23.

[2] Commonwealth of Australia (2019) *National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy*, (Napthine Review) p 86.

2.3   Methodology

In the first stage of the project, Outpost Consulting conducted extensive desk research that drew on material from the following sources:

- Australian literature, including research into the experiences of RRR tertiary students, the availability of student support services and the impact these have on outcomes from tertiary education
- International literature, focusing on support and services provided for tertiary students
- Information on current Australian policies, programs and services that support RRR tertiary students
- Data collections that relate to the experiences of RRR tertiary students.

During this initial stage, a small number of interviews was conducted with identified experts from the Department to help identify additional sources of information and data. The preparation of a research report was used to identify and document potential gaps in the current provision of support services and areas for further exploration through the consultation stage of the project.

The consultation stage engaged with a wide range of tertiary education stakeholders, including both the deliverers and the receivers of support services, to gather information on current provision and student experiences. Consultation included engagement with:

- 10 peak provider bodies
- 6 student-focussed organisations/groups
- 2 tertiary education regulators
- 6 researchers and education experts
- 4 DESE teams
- 73 tertiary education providers – 27 through targeted interviews, 13 through a provider survey and 42 via focus group (note some providers contributed in more than one way)
- 70 students through interviews and focus group discussions.

Consultation with tertiary education providers included institutions based in regional and metro areas serving RRR students. Consultation with students included individuals who were studying in their RRR area either face-to-face, online or through blended delivery, and individuals who had relocated away from RRR areas to access tertiary education. Copies of discussion guides used during consultation are included in Appendix A. A summary of organisations and individuals consulted is included in Appendix B.

Insights from stakeholder engagement informed the development of a Good Practice Framework (the Framework) for support services for RRR students. The framework is adapted from an evaluation framework previously developed and piloted by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) for the Department.[3] Robust research and testing through widespread consultation with universities underpinned the identification of the four elements in the ACER framework:

- Resourcing
- Sense of belonging
- Communication
- Effectiveness.

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[3] Matthews, D., Milgate, G and Clarke, L. (2018) Assessment of university support services for regional and remote students on transition to university: Final Report, prepared by Australian Council for Educational Research for the Commonwealth Department of Education and Training.

The ACER framework was designed as a self-evaluation tool for Australian universities to assess their support services. Early consultation for this project found a strong alignment between the priorities and concerns being expressed by tertiary providers and students more broadly and the elements and indicators of the ACER framework. Building on the framework was recognised as an effective way to organise the good practice insights accumulated through the project, and the approach was supported by peak bodies and ACER.

In adapting the ACER framework to provide a structure for considering good practice across the whole tertiary sector, it was necessary to expand some elements and concepts to strengthen the student voice, reflect the realities of the VET sector and independent higher education providers, along with the universities, and embrace potential for practical action. The framework was expanded to encompass an understanding of the significance of organisational culture, greater attention to engagement with students, and more comprehensive consideration of monitoring and improving services through knowledge management.

The resulting Framework comprises five elements. These elements represent areas of commonality between diverse student and tertiary provider experiences drawn from the project consultations and research:

1. **Culture** – support for RRR students is built in and valued within the education provider's functions
2. **Resourcing** – products and services are available for RRR students
3. **Belonging** – RRR students feel integrated, affiliated and comfortable to participate in academic and social life
4. **Engagement** – RRR students are aware of support services available and ways to interact
5. **Knowledge** – knowledge is developed and used to improve services for RRR students.

An outline of the Framework content is included in Appendix C.

A draft version of the Framework was tested with national provider bodies and key informants prior to finalisation of the resource. Feedback was largely positive and assisted in further clarifying the Framework's purpose, audience and key concepts, and aligning it more closely with operational realities for providers. Through the user testing information was gathered on ideas for using the Framework. These are outlined in Appendix D.

The finalised Framework is a principles-based tool to assist tertiary education providers to:

- consider elements of good practice in supporting RRR students
- reflect on current practice, and
- enhance support services, informed in part by what others are doing and saying.

The Framework is designed to enable use in a variety of formats and to provide a basis for sharing of practice by those with first-hand experience of supporting RRR students. A dissemination strategy for the Framework is included in Section 6 of this report.

This final report documents findings from the project's research and consultation and identifies issues that may be worthy of further consideration by the Department.

2.4   Terminology

The terminology adopted in this report has been influenced by the sources of intelligence consulted in the desk research and by the terms used by key stakeholders.

Terminology that is significant to this report includes:

Regional, rural and remote (RRR)	Also referred to as 'rural, regional and remote' is an umbrella term used to describe the non-metropolitan areas of Australia. Under the Australian Statistical Geography Standard, the terms 'regional' and 'remote' also refer to specific categories of remoteness. While this report frequently uses RRR to refer broadly to non-metropolitan areas, the term is reductive and does not reflect the huge diversity of communities represented.
	The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) uses the Australian Statistical Geography Standard Remoteness Structure to divide Australia into five classes of remoteness based on a measure of road distance to service centres. The five classes are: Major Cities, Inner Regional, Outer Regional, Remote, and Very Remote.[4] For the purposes of this research, all classes are of interest except for Major Cities.
Tertiary education	In Australia, this includes higher education (including universities) and vocational education and training (VET).
	The **higher education sector** includes public and private universities, Australian branches of overseas universities and other higher education providers. Higher education providers offer qualifications ranging from undergraduate awards (bachelor degrees, associate degrees and advanced diplomas) to postgraduate awards (graduate certificates and diplomas, masters and doctoral degrees). The Australian higher education sector is regulated by the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) under the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency Act 2011.
	The **VET sector** includes technical and further education (TAFE) institutes, adult and community education providers, agricultural colleges, private providers, community organisations, industry skill centres, and commercial and enterprise training providers. Some universities and schools also provide VET. The Australian VET sector is regulated by the Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA), the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority (VRQA) and Western Australia's Training Accreditation Council (TAC) under the National Vocational Education and Training Regulator Act 2011.

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[4] Australian Bureau of Statistics (2016) *The Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS) Remoteness Structure*, accessed 10/05/21, https://www.abs.gov.au/websitedbs/d3310114.nsf/home/remoteness+structure

3 Context

Exploring the support services available to, and needed by, RRR tertiary students is complicated by the diversity of tertiary students and tertiary providers across the country. There is no typical regional student.[5] Even when attempts have been made by various researchers to capture different types of students, e.g., those who leave regional areas and those who stay,[6] blind spots remain where research has not included consideration of mature age students, or VET students.

RRR tertiary students include individuals who:

- leave their RRR location immediately after completing secondary school to access tertiary education in a metropolitan area
- remain in their RRR location after completing secondary school to access tertiary education:
    - provided by regionally-located providers – regional universities, regional campuses of metro universities or regionally-located independent higher education providers or VET providers
    - through online delivery from a tertiary education provider that may be regional or metro
- undertake tertiary education as mature age learners by relocating or remaining in their RRR location to access a regional provider or study online.

All these learners may also undertake their tertiary study part-time and/or through an employment pathway, e.g. an apprenticeship or traineeship, or a higher education qualification that is supported by their employer. While Australia's highly urbanised population means that many services, including tertiary education providers, are concentrated in the major metropolitan areas, this is not globally unique. The challenges faced by rural or regional students in accessing tertiary education have been noted in other countries including the United Kingdom, Sweden, Denmark, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, Canada and the United States.[7]

3.1   Tertiary providers

The Australian higher education system is made up of more than 180 higher education providers. The table below summarises the providers on the national register of higher education providers at the time of writing.

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[5] National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (n.d.) *Successful outcomes for regional and remote students in Australian higher education: Issues, challenges, opportunities and recommendations* from research funded by the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education.
[6] National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (n.d.) *Successful outcomes for regional and remote students in Australian higher education: Issues, challenges, opportunities and recommendations* from research funded by the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education.
7 United Kingdom: Rural England (2019) Challenges facing rural 16-18 year olds in accessing appropriate education and work based learning, Sweden: Haley, A. (2020) 'Geographical differentiation in access to higher education in Sweden', in *Learning and Teaching: the International Journal of Higher Education in the Social Sciences*, Volume 13: Issue 3, 1 December 2020, Denmark: Myklebust, J.P. (2021) 'Government to move thousands of study places out of bigger cities', in *University World News*, 5 June 2021, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan: Hughes, A. (2018) 'Barriers to Entering Higher Education: Rural Students' Perspective', in *Journal of Information Technologies and Lifelong Learning*, Volume 1, Issue 2, December 2018, Canada: Iqbal, F., Wong, C., Grewal, S. and Iqbal, F. (2020) *Empowering Rural Students on Campus*, A recommendations report by University of Calgary Scholars Academy students in partnership with the Foundation for Rural Youth Empowerment, USA: Marcus, J. and Krupnick, M. (2017) 'The Rural Higher-Education Crisis', *The Atlantic*

Provider category	Summarised category requirements
42 Australian universities (37 public, 5 private)	• Self-accredits courses of study in at least three broad fields of education, or one of two broad fields in the case of a university with a specialised focus • Delivers Doctoral Degrees • History of at least 5 years of successful delivery with strong student outcomes
1 overseas university	• Delivers at least one overseas higher education qualification in Australia • Recognised as a university by its home country
3 university colleges	• Authority to self-accredit at least 70% of its courses of study • History of at least 5 years of successful delivery with strong student outcomes
141 institutes of higher education	• Offer at least one accredited higher education course of study

There is considerable variation between higher education providers in terms of discipline areas and qualifications offered, and the size and diversity of the student population. While universities comprise only 25% of higher education providers, they account for the bulk of student enrolments (93%) and as a result dominate public understanding of higher education.[8]

While there is a reasonable depth of research on the experiences of higher education students in Australia, it often does not clearly delineate between the RRR status of students or provider locations. Student data can also be obscured by the inclusion of overseas students and/or by the exclusion of students from non-university higher education providers. Additionally, although much of the literature divides institutions into categories of metropolitan and regional, there is not really a clear division between the two. Some institutions are clearly regional, but a number of what might be considered metropolitan universities have a significant presence in regional Australia.[9] The current regional loading funding model is based on where the education is delivered to students rather than the location of the institution.

The Australian VET sector includes almost 4,000 registered training organisations RTOs ranging from micro-operations with one trainer and a handful of students to major institutions, like TAFE NSW, training more than 500,000 students annually. Many VET providers, including most large providers, also have international students and are bound by requirements for delivering to overseas students. The support services offered to VET students are, therefore, highly variable depending on the size and nature of the RTO they are enrolled with.

The National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) is responsible for collecting and managing research and statistics on the VET sector. While this collection includes comprehensive data on student enrolments and completions, and qualitative research on many aspects of VET, to date there appears to have been little focus on the experiences of RRR students.

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[8] Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (2017) *Characteristics of Australian higher education providers and their relation to first-year student attrition*, Australian Government
[9] National Tertiary Education Industry Union (2010) *NTEU Submission to the Review of Regional Provision of Higher Education*.

While most Australian education providers are clustered in metropolitan and inner regional areas,[10] VET providers are more geographically dispersed, and more numerous, than universities and are therefore more physically accessible in regional Australia.

3.2   RRR students

In comparison with metropolitan students, the Napthine Review found that RRR tertiary students are more likely to be female, mature aged, Indigenous, and from low SES backgrounds. They are also more likely than metropolitan students to be juggling competing priorities, including work commitments and caring responsibilities.[11] Part-time[12] and online study[13] are more common among RRR students.

These student characteristics are even more pronounced for more remote geographical locations.[14] Research indicates that the differences between regional and remote students are so significant, that remote students should not be considered a component of a larger regional cohort but a distinct group in themselves.[15] Remote students frequently belong to two or more equity groups and possess student characteristics that have higher risks of non-completion, such as online study and part-time enrolment.[16]

Some of the characteristics that are more prevalent among RRR students have been identified as factors that may contribute to higher levels of attrition. However, a Higher Education Standards Panel discussion paper used regression techniques to show that student characteristics only explained a small part (22.5%) of variation in student attrition. Statistical evidence suggests that the institution is a more important factor in explaining attrition.[17] The analysis found that the following characteristics are associated with institutions with higher levels of attrition:

- Institutions admitting a larger proportion of students on the basis of prior VET education
- Institutions with a lower percentage of postgraduate students
- Institutions smaller in size
- Institutions with a higher percentage of external enrolments
- Institutions having a lower percentage of senior academic staff, and
- Institutions with a higher percentage of part-time enrolments.[18]

While these institutional characteristics may apply to regionally-based institutions, the regression analysis specifically considered regional status as a variable and did not identify it as a characteristic that was associated with higher levels of attrition.

There are notable differences between RRR student engagement with VET and higher education. People in RRR locations are more likely than their metropolitan counterparts to have a VET qualification.[19] Also, while

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[10] Commonwealth of Australia (2019) *National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy* (Napthine Review).
[11] Commonwealth of Australia (2019) *National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy* (Napthine Review).
[12] Commonwealth of Australia 2019, National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy
[13] Pollard, L. (2018) *Remote Student University Success: An analysis of policy and practice*, National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education and The University of Western Australia, Perth.
[14] Crawford, N. (2021) *"On the radar": Supporting the mental wellbeing of mature-aged students in regional and remote Australia*, Equity Fellowship Report, National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education and University of Tasmania, Perth.
[15] Pollard, L. (2018) *Remote Student University Success: An analysis of policy and practice*, National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education and The University of Western Australia, Perth.
[16] Pollard, L. (2018) *Remote Student University Success: An analysis of policy and practice*, National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education and The University of Western Australia, Perth.
[17] Higher Education Standards Panel (2017) *Final Report – Improving retention, completion and success in higher education,* Australian Government Department of Education, Skills and Employment, Canberra
[18] Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (2017) *Characteristics of Australian higher education providers and their relation to first-year student attrition*, Australian Government
[19] Commonwealth of Australia (2019) *National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy* (Napthine Review).

VET participation rates for Indigenous RRR students are comparable with the broader population, their participation rate for higher education is less than half that of the broader population.[20]

The Napthine Review found that RRR students often need to relocate or travel significant distances to access their desired course of study; nearly 60 per cent of RRR students relocate to metropolitan areas to study, a further 12 per cent move to another RRR location.

3.3 Legislative framework

Regulatory requirements for the provision of support to students in post-compulsory education settings in Australia focus primarily on educational support, and diversity and equity for identified groups. However, broader and more detailed pastoral care is legislated for international students studying in Australia. The support services provided to tertiary students in Australia vary between provider types in line with differing regulatory requirements and policy drivers. In summary:

- **Higher education providers** must provide equivalent opportunities for academic success irrespective of students' background. For Table A universities, policy targets and funding drivers encourage providers to support increased participation from student cohorts identified in the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP), which currently includes RRR students.

- **VET providers** must support the needs of individual learners. Policy and funding drivers can encourage providers to engage with specific learner cohorts in targeted programs and/or locations.

- **Providers of education and training to overseas students,** including higher education and VET providers, must provide specified support services, advice and information to international students studying in Australia, irrespective of their place or mode of study.

Detail on legislative requirements for the provision of student support is included in Appendix E.

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[20] Commonwealth of Australia (2019) *National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy* (Napthine Review).

4 Support services for RRR students

The Napthine Review identified a number of supports which are important for tertiary RRR students. These were discussed with tertiary education providers in consultations for the project. Most providers felt that their support services addressed many of the items on the list, however there were few support services targeted only at RRR students. Consultation participants generally did not find the list of supports identified in the Napthine Review useful for speaking about the support services required by RRR students as many of the items are equally relevant to all students.

Support identified in Napthine Review	Consultation finding
Pastoral care	Pastoral care is a standard feature of support services offered by tertiary providers although there are variations between sectors and institutions in how it is described and understood. Pastoral care, encompassing counselling and student wellbeing, is generally provided for the whole student body, not specifically for student cohorts, although additional support is frequently offered to First Nations students. Research indicated that greater focus on pastoral care counselling is evident in higher education in the US and the UK, and in community colleges in the US, than is typically seen in Australia.[21] This was confirmed in consultation with support services providers who had experience in tertiary education in North America.
Specific RRR student orientation	Few of the education providers consulted reported having an orientation program specifically for RRR students, although many of the regional universities provide specific programs for students from out of town, whether they are RRR or not. Some residential colleges also offer orientation programs to supplement the general O-week activities. More in-depth orientation is offered through some Indigenous support units, including in one case a 3-day camp to prepare students for university life. Orientation was identified in the research for the role it could play in facilitating RRR student interactions and connections through pre-university transition and preparation.[22] The value of family-friendly orientation activities was also highlighted in research.[23] While consultation participants recognised the potential value of orientation programs designed for the needs of RRR students, few had put this into practice.
Mentoring/buddy programs	Many higher education providers have mentoring/buddy programs. For some of these, the focus is on academic support rather than broader goals. Mentoring/buddy programs are frequently designed for specific students, e.g. first year students, students in a particular discipline, online students, Indigenous students. Several providers indicated that their programs had suffered during COVID or had faltered due to expectations that they be student-led.

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[21] International Association of Student Affairs and Services (2020) *Student Affairs and Services in HE: Global Foundations, Issues, and Best Practices*, Eds Roger B. Ludeman and Birgit Schreiber, Deutsches Studentenwerk, Monbijouplatz 11, 10178 Berlin Germany accessed 17 July 2020 https://www.studentenwerke.de/sites/default/files/210129_dsw_iasas_final_web.pdf

[22] Crawford, N. (2021) *"On the radar": Supporting the mental wellbeing of mature-aged students in regional and remote Australia*, Equity Fellowship Report, National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education and University of Tasmania, Perth.

[23] Nelson, K., Picton, C., McMilan, J., Edwards, D., Devlin, M. and Martin, K. (n.d.) *Understanding the completion patterns of equity students in regional universities,* National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, University of Southern Cross, Federation University, Regional Universities Network.

Support identified in Napthine Review	Consultation finding
	Research found that while most universities have mentoring or buddy systems[24] many RRR students felt they did not have anyone they could turn to for support.[25] Consultation confirmed that student perceptions of support available differ from the perspectives of support providers and that many students felt they did not have a mentor or support person.
Priority accommodation for RRR students	Few higher education providers have an accommodation guarantee to secure on-campus accommodation for their undergraduate students. While one university reported giving priority to RRR students for on-campus accommodation, most institutions did not specifically target RRR students for priority access to accommodation. Where on-campus accommodation is available, its considerable cost was noted as an issue for RRR students. Thus, access to affordable accommodation remains a significant issue for RRR students relocating to undertake tertiary studies. Both the research and consultation confirmed the criticality of access to accommodation for RRR students. However, affordability is a more pertinent issue than prioritisation of access.
Academic support, including academic concierge	All the higher education and VET providers consulted offer academic support of some kind. While some have adopted a centralised concierge-style approach (this is more frequently described as 'triage'), others seem to favour a discipline or subject-based approach based on an understanding that students are more likely to make initial contact with their tutor or lecturer. Some providers offer unlimited access to tutoring or academic mentors, and some bring specialised academic support (e.g., assignment writing) into classes. Although some consultation participants felt that RRR students would benefit from access to preparatory programs prior to entering tertiary education, most expressed a view that the academic support needs of RRR students are no different to those of the general student population. Some providers expressed a view that singling RRR students out for academic support represented negative stereotyping. Research pointed to the benefits of 'strength-based' approaches for supporting students from diverse backgrounds by embedding academic support as part of a mainstreamed, inclusive curriculum.[26] Some of the providers consulted are consciously adopting this approach.

[24] Matthews, D., Milgate, G and Clarke, L. (2018) *Assessment of university support services for regional and remote students on transition to university: Final Report*, prepared by Australian Council for Educational Research for the Commonwealth Department of Education and Training.
[25] Crawford, N. (2021) *"On the radar": Supporting the mental wellbeing of mature-aged students in regional and remote Australia*, Equity Fellowship Report, National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education and University of Tasmania, Perth.
[26] Scobie, H. and Picard, M. (2018) 'Embedding mental wellbeing in Australian regional universities: Equity interventions', *International Studies in Widening Participation*, Vol. 5 Iss. 1, pp 65-79, published by the English Language and Foundation Studies Centre and the Centre of Excellence for Equity in Higher Education, The University of Newcastle, Australia.

Support identified in Napthine Review	Consultation finding
Regular contact with all RRR students via email, phone and SMS	Some of the providers consulted raised a tension between keeping in regular contact with students and overwhelming them with information, particularly by email in the initial settling-in stage. Few providers differentiated their communication approach specifically for RRR students. Many acknowledged the need for greater sophistication to enable well-timed and targeted communication with students. Some had sophisticated systems to understand when individual students were disengaging, or experiencing periods of stress, and targeted communications around these times. The research highlighted the benefits of proactively contacting students to encourage engagement with support services.[27] While many of the providers consulted expressed a desire to establish more proactive and targeted communication with students, this was not generally viewed as something that was specifically required by RRR students.
Childcare support	Most of the providers consulted did not offer childcare support. Even providers that had this service available did not tend to regard it as part of student support or that it was a significant consideration for RRR students (quote: 'where childcare is really an issue, those people just never become students; by the time they enrol with us they have sorted out the childcare'). However, childcare support can be important where courses include block programming, and one provider offers this service to Indigenous students who travel to campus with their children to attend block lessons. Although the desk research found that many higher education and VET providers have childcare services available to students, this was not identified in the literature as a specific concern for RRR students.
Employment assistance	For the providers consulted, employment assistance was focused primarily on helping students into employment for work placements or employment on completion of their qualification. There seemed to be limited assistance to help students find work while studying. Students who had to relocate to study said they would highly value this support given their lack of local networks and the financial challenges they faced. Although employment assistance did not emerge in the desk research as a major concern, many of the RRR students consulted thought that more support should be provided. Students emphasised the difficulty of finding work in a new location where they had no contacts, and the criticality of having an income to support themselves while living away from home.
Cultural safety	Many of the providers consulted had well-developed programs and services specifically for First Nations students that aimed to enhance a sense of belonging and inclusion. Some of the non-indigenous RRR students consulted felt that their cultural identity was not well supported in unfamiliar metropolitan settings. Research found there is a need to 'demystify' academic cultures and skills by creating an environment that fosters a sense of belonging among students irrespective of their

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[27] Matthews, D., Milgate, G and Clarke, L. (2018) *Assessment of university support services for regional and remote students on transition to university: Final Report*, prepared by Australian Council for Educational Research for the Commonwealth Department of Education and Training.

Support identified in Napthine Review	Consultation finding
	background.[28] This was confirmed through the consultations with RRR students from a range of backgrounds.

This research has explored when, where and how these and other supports are important for students and used the findings to inform the development of the Framework that accompanies this report. The Framework identifies elements of good practice and suggests various actions that providers could consider, strategically and operationally, to support RRR students.

The tertiary education sector encompasses an enormous diversity of providers and students with variation in provider size, location, program offerings and learner cohorts within higher education and VET. These differences may impact how support is delivered and what types of services are most needed by learners. Given the diversity of providers and students, it is not advisable to specify detailed requirements about the best approaches for supporting RRR students. However, clear themes arose which have been reflected in the Framework developed through this project.

The Framework is a high-level principles-based guide that can help all providers to reflect on, and enhance, their support for students, particularly RRR students. It is important to highlight that all education providers consulted were overwhelmingly positive about the need to provide high quality support services to RRR students, although some individuals in peak bodies representing education providers raised limitations or provisos on what their members should be expected to do in supporting RRR students.

The following analysis provides detail from the desk research and consultations on each of the Framework's five elements, including evidence for the inclusion of each element and examples of support offered by tertiary providers that represent good or innovative practice. The five elements of the Framework are outlined in the table below.

Elements	Areas of focus
1. Culture	a. Partnerships with students b. Leadership c. Embedding support d. Responsiveness
2. Resourcing	a. Financial assistance b. Wellbeing support c. Academic support d. Accommodation assistance
3. Belonging	a. Connection and identity b. Support to settle into study c. Mentoring d. Indigenous perspectives and cultural competency e. Community outreach and engagement
4. Engagement	a. Proactive and specialised communications b. Student awareness of support services c. Online support services d. Support for online or distance students
5. Knowledge	a. Monitoring of needs and responses b. Prioritising resources and funding c. Ongoing improvement d. Sharing of good practice

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[28] Scobie, H. and Picard, M. (2018) 'Embedding mental wellbeing in Australian regional universities: Equity interventions', *International Studies in Widening Participation*, Vol. 5 Iss. 1, pp 65-79, published by the English Language and Foundation Studies Centre and the Centre of Excellence for Equity in Higher Education, The University of Newcastle, Australia.

4.1 Framework element 1: Culture

The role of organisational culture emerged as a significant contributor to good practice in the provision of support for RRR students. The extent to which support is built in and valued within education providers' functions is seen to impact the effectiveness of provision.

4.1.1 Partnerships with students

In consultation, some providers and students talked about governance structures that gave RRR student representatives a voice in the provider's decision-making processes – not merely participation in consultative bodies or talk fests.

> *It's important to have a student voice from here because we don't have the same support as people might in cities.*
>
> VET student on Broome campus

One provider spoke of their approach to gathering feedback from online students to inform their strategic plan. Feedback is sought from students in week 9 of the program with online forums used to directly ask students what is needed from their perspective. Feedback from these forums is acted on and then formally showcased so that students can see the changes that have resulted.

Another provider emphasised the use of student feedback in designing their first-year transition program that specifically includes RRR students. The program is driven by students' needs, wants and interests and tailored each year based on feedback from current students and previous program participants.

Several providers noted that the shift to more online learning during COVID-19 had reduced interaction between students and staff making it more difficult for the provider to know what current student needs are. Some expressed a view that stronger personal relationships with students had a positive effect on student empowerment, satisfaction with support services and retention.

> *I used to talk to students in the piazza all the time, but there are far fewer hanging around on campus now.*
>
> Regional campus manager

One student reported on the value of being a member of a student board, both to herself and to the students she was representing.

> *We get to discuss, consider and decide on things that affect us all. That gives me a real sense of belonging.*
>
> Student board representative

VET providers noted that it is more challenging to have a collaborative student voice where courses have a shorter duration or involve intermittent connection with the RTO. Apprentices and trainees may only be on campus one day each week, or in short blocks every few months, making it difficult to participate in formal interaction methods.

> **Good practice message for the Framework:** *RRR students' knowledge, skills, experiences and cultures are valued and systematically considered.*

4.1.2 Leadership

In consultation, some stakeholders identified the importance of a strategic organisational approach to the provision of support services and the significant role that organisational leaders play in that approach. However, many of the providers consulted were conscious that their current approach was not as cohesive or visibly supported by leadership as they would like.

> *Our approach is more ad hoc really. We need to stitch all the relevant (support) strategies together to be more holistic.*
>
> University Pro Vice Chancellor

In 2020, when tertiary providers and students were significantly impacted by COVID-19, some providers were able to successfully implement a cohesive response through focussed leadership working with all levels of staff. One university which had student populations in Melbourne and regional Victoria that were severely impacted by lockdowns, was able to act quickly to get financial support to affected students. Staff attributed the university's success to an agile and highly integrated organisational structure and prioritisation of the needs of Victoria's regional and rural communities in the strategic plan.

For some tertiary providers, lack of support from leadership may be based on a belief that support services are not a priority for the organisation. One consultation participant suggested that support services products need to not only serve student needs, but also speak to organisational leaders and academics to convince them to engage with support services issues.

> *There's a perception amongst our leadership that because we have a reputation for low attrition and good student outcomes, we don't need to invest in support for students. But if we want to have greater diversity of students, we need to increase support services!*
>
> University Manager, Student Equity

> **Good practice message for the Framework:** *the whole organisation is committed to, and involved in, student centred approaches.*

4.1.3   Embedding

Research has highlighted the benefits of embedded and integrated approaches to the provision of support to enhance learning experiences for all students.[29] Research from community colleges in the United States has shown that approaches that integrate support services into other activities are effective for delivering services to students who spend little time on campus.[30]

In the United States, Beacon Mentoring is a program to increase student use of support services at community colleges. The program recruited and trained college employees to make several short classroom presentations to maths classes about the student services available on campus and work with the faculty to identify struggling students and offer them early help. The program was based on three simple ideas: that students who need existing services often do not access them; that student services staff need to be alerted when students start to fail in class; and that students need a 'go to' person on campus.[31]

Australian research has also recommended enhancing the links between academic and co-curricular programs by embedding activities that are traditionally outside the classroom into the curriculum.[32]

In consultation, many providers referred to the work of Sally Kift on transition pedagogy[33] and how it can support a whole-of-institution approach to student support. One provider suggested that a more integrated approach to the provision of support can address the current problem of service visibility – many students are just not aware of the services available to them.

The more supports are embedded into the academic program the more aware students are of them. Among the students consulted, this appeared to be a more consistent feature of VET programs.

> *We knew about most of the supports before we started. Most things were discussed beforehand. And then when we finished each block they would tell us everything we needed to know for the next block.*
>
> Annie, VET student

A range of providers described work they are undertaking to introduce a more holistic approach to support services:

- One public university is working to embed transition pedagogy into the curriculum by examining the impact their academic staff can have and the support they need from professional staff to respond more systematically to student support needs.

- A private university has recognised that academic staff are often the first point of contact for students seeking all types of support. A range of communication strategies has been put in place to ensure that academic staff know where and how to refer students to other services.

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[29] Fossey, E., Chaffey, L., Venville, A., Ennals, P. Douglas, J. and Bigby, C. (2017) 'Navigating the complexity of disability support in tertiary education: perspectives of students and disability service staff', *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 21:8, 822-832, DOI: 10.1080/13603116.2017.1278798.

[30] Cooper, M. (2010) 'Student support services at community college: a strategy for increasing student persistence and attainment', *The White House Summit on Community Colleges*, American Association of Community Colleges, Washington, pp.22–29, viewed 14 Jul 2021 https://www2.ed.gov/PDFDocs/college-completion/04-student-support-services-at-community-colleges.pdf

[31] MDRC (2010) 'Can Improved Student Services Boost Community College Student Success?' *MDRC Higher Education publication*, February 2010, viewed 17 July 2021 https://www.mdrc.org/publication/can-improved-student-services-boost-community-college-student-success

[32] Pollard, L. (2018) *Remote Student University Success: An analysis of policy and practice*, National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education and The University of Western Australia, Perth.

[33] http://transitionpedagogy.com/

- VET providers often have less visible student support services, but support is strongly embedded into services generally with VET students frequently citing their teacher/trainer as the first point of contact and main provider of all support needs. Some VET providers have recognised the benefits and risks that may arise from this approach and have made efforts to equip trainers with the knowledge and skills to direct students to appropriate services.

- One independent higher education provider has embedded wellbeing into the curriculum for all students through a compulsory subject delivered by a psychologist. The program ensures that all students are aware of sources of support available to them.

- A peak provider body reported that faculties may enroll students into an online Moodle that runs alongside their subjects and alerts the student to services that are relevant at different points in the program, such as peer assisted study support.

One benefit of an integrated approach is the ability to normalise access to services. Students and providers agreed that perceived stigma around accessing support services can deter students from seeking help. One consultation participant suggested that the current deficit framing of support services could be turned around by re-labelling them as opportunities for development.

> *At my university they are letting you know about the supports all the time – in lectures, in emails, etc. Even before a new subject begins they always tell you about the different supports that might be relevant. Saying it early normalises it.*
>
> Marnie, university student

Good practice message for the Framework: *support services are integrated into student life including into teaching and learning practice.*

4.1.4   Responsiveness

Providers and students commented on the importance of responding to individual student needs. A variety of examples were highlighted where providers had implemented changes in direct response to issues that were of concern to RRR students. These include:

- Rescheduling the time for online seminars to after 5pm because RRR students who were working were unable to participate.

- Introducing an online proctoring system so that RRR students no longer need to travel to an examination centre or find someone in their workplace to be the invigilator.

- Sourcing funds from alumni to support and treat students who were struggling during COVID-19 lockdowns.

- Providing emergency cash for a student experiencing domestic violence and further financial support to relocate.

- Supporting students to access scholarships that are specifically suited to their needs.

After the end of my first year, I approached the residential college and offered to help mentor first year students but told them I couldn't afford to live at the College. They created a scholarship which allowed me to stay on at the college. By my third year, they had started a rural women's scholarship.

Jess, university student

Consultations highlighted the significant role that lecturers, teachers and trainers play in identifying and responding to individual student needs. In environments where class sizes are smaller, students indicated that closer connections were developed that enabled the provision of more responsive services. However, providers also spoke of wanting to implement systemic approaches that would increase responsiveness. One provider emphasised the value of establishing touchpoints throughout the student journey that can be used to establish triggers for action and interaction. Another is investigating centralised software to track the student journey and monitor various indicators for support needs.

Good practice message for the Framework: *there is flexibility and receptiveness to consider individual needs in student services.*

Issue for consideration 1

Use of support services can be normalised by reframing them through positive and inclusive terminology as services that are relevant to all students. It may be helpful for this normalising approach to also be adopted wherever possible in government-funded programs and policies so that student support is not viewed as remedial action that is only relevant to some students.

4.2   Framework element 2: Resourcing

The products and services that tertiary providers make available to RRR students were a key focus of the Napthine Review. These were also of central concern for the students and providers consulted and an important element of good practice provision.

4.2.1   Financial assistance

The financial difficulties experienced by RRR students are extensively documented. Financial hardships reported by RRR students include aspects related to travel, studying costs, meeting basic needs (including food and rent).[34] The 2017 Universities Australia (UA) Student Finances Survey shows that regional students are more likely to experience financial stress than metropolitan students. Among RRR students, 45% receive student income support and 38% of RRR students have expenses exceeding their income. The survey showed the median expenditure of these students was higher than for other domestic students

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[34] Devlin, M. and McKay, J. (n.d.) *The financial realities for students from low SES backgrounds at Australian regional universities*, Australian International Journal of Rural Education

mostly due to their higher accommodation costs. Regional students are also more likely (as are students from low SES backgrounds) to be supporting dependents.[35]

A study in NSW found that 60% of current regional secondary students said that they were concerned that they would not have enough money to pay for further education, while 56% of students said that they did not want to go into debt.[36]

In consultation many students identified financial issues as the most significant barrier for them. Students frequently said that their families were not able to support them financially. Many students needed to work to support themselves during study and found it difficult to balance their study, work and family commitment, sometimes jeopardising their studies in the process. Narrow eligibility requirements for scholarships and means testing of parental income for Centrelink benefits were raised by students as issues of concern.

Providers reported that more scholarships are needed to support RRR students and create parity. One provider indicated that when students were unsuccessful in their scholarship application, the university offered other forms of support such as helping them to find affordable accommodation or to secure a part-time job.

> *Financial issues are significant. Initially I got a QTAC RRES[37] scholarship and this made a big difference. But you're only eligible if you apply as a school leaver. When I changed degrees and had to reapply though QTAC it meant I was no longer a school leaver, so the scholarships stopped. It made a big difference.*
>
> Marnie, university student

Providers and students reported that information on scholarships and financial assistance is difficult for students (and their parents) to navigate.

> *It's hard to navigate scholarships. I realised later that I was eligible for a lot, but it's a big list. The criteria are quite dense and some applications require a lot of work with no support.*
>
> Jacob, university student

While relocation, travel and accommodation were identified as the most significant costs for many students, there was also an identified need for flexibility in how financial assistance can be used by students. RRR students are a diverse group and their life circumstances and needs vary widely.

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[35] Thomson, V. (2019) *Go8 Submission: Regional, Rural and Remote Education Strategy*, Group of Eight Australia, viewed 4 July 2021 https://go8.edu.au/go8-submission-regional-rural-and-remote-education-strategy

[36] National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (n.d.) *Regional transitions to university: Report highlights*, prepared by the NCSEHE for the NSW Department of Education.

[37] It is noted that the Department of Education, Skills and Training reviews the program guidelines for each scholarship round to best meet the policy intent. Since 2018, over 4000 scholarships have been awarded. Another scholarship round is due to commence in 2022, and more information can be found at www.qtac.edu.au/rres-program.

Individualised support could provide financial assistance that acknowledges that RRR students may need:

- childcare support – there are increasing numbers of mature-age students and the financial pressure of juggling the balance between study and earning is a major reason for attrition
- capacity to participate in social life – RRR students on a tight budget are at risk of social isolation when they cannot afford to join societies or attend social events as part of their tertiary study.

For Indigenous students, the Indigenous Student Success Program (ISSP) provides Commonwealth assistance for Table A and Table B universities to prioritise and accelerate improvements in academic achievements by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The funding can be used by universities for:

- scholarships and other support to assist Indigenous students to participate and complete a course of study
- academic support (including supplementary tutorial support for Indigenous students in addition to mainstream tutorial support)
- pastoral care to provide emotional and cultural support for Indigenous students
- strategies to accelerate improvements to Indigenous student outcomes
- strategies to foster culturally safe learning environments for Indigenous students and staff, including prioritising cultural competency across all staff of the universities
- measures that engage and prepare Indigenous students for higher education or re-engage Indigenous students who have withdrawn from study.

In most instances, ISSP funding cannot be used to support Indigenous students enrolled in a VET course of study.

Destination Australia scholarships, funded by the Australian Government, are available for domestic and international students studying at regional tertiary campuses. While the aim of this program is to encourage students and graduates to regional Australia, they can also be accessed by students from RRR areas. In 2022, priority is being given to supporting domestic students due to the impacts of COVID-19 on international students. The scholarships provide $15,000 per year paid to the student and $1,500 per year per student for the tertiary provider to assist with promotion and administration of the scholarships.

Feedback from a regional provider indicated that timeframes for the scholarship did not allow enough time for the provider to effectively promote the opportunity to potential students. However, the restricted timeframe created greater opportunity for local, regional students to take up the scholarships.

Many of the students consulted would like assistance to find part-time employment. For RRR students who have relocated to a new city and need to support themselves, their most pressing concern is to get a job that is compatible with their studies. Often students in this situation have no connections or knowledge of the local job market, so have greater need for employment assistance than students who have not relocated.

> *I would have appreciated help finding employment. It's hard to find a job without knowing anyone or having any connections.*
>
> Jess, university student

4.2.2   Wellbeing support

Research shows that a high and growing percentage of Australian university students experience mental health problems and that higher numbers are found in equity groups. One in four students between 15 and 24 years of age experience mental health issues and it is estimated that over 210,000 university students in Australia will experience mental health issues in one calendar year. Rural and regional students are at particularly high risk of psychological distress.[38] In 2020, the Productivity Commission recommended that tertiary education institutions should continue to expand online mental health services to meet student needs.[39]

In consultation, even students who had not accessed the counselling services their provider offered reported that they valued the availability of the service. Some students provided positive reports about the way counselling helped them, including one student who received priority access to unlimited counselling after experiencing stress and anxiety caused by relocating.

International research has noted the unusually high proportion of students at Australian universities who do not live on campus – unlike North American and European universities where a large proportion of students live in university residences. Most Australian universities have commuter campuses, with students remaining at home or in their home town for study. Many students are not only not living on campus, they are striving to minimise the amount of time they need to be on campus. Support services programs need to be designed to connect with these time-poor and transient members of the learning community.[40]

Although embedding support for mental health and wellbeing into the curricula has been recommended for best results, research has found that few universities take an embedded approach. Mental health professionals and educators typically work in silos within universities resulting in only limited success in addressing student wellbeing needs.[41]

> *I definitely think feeling like you belong somewhere is very important for your mental health especially.*
>
> Annika, university student

The consultation found that tertiary providers are acutely aware of the increasing mental health needs of their students. Many reported that they had expanded the counselling and referral supports and services they offered in recent years in response to increased student need. Providers report that it is difficult to source expertise, but this is essential to ensure that students have the support they need to succeed.

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[38] Scobie, H. and Picard, M. (2018) 'Embedding mental wellbeing in Australian regional universities: Equity interventions', *International Studies in Widening Participation*, Vol. 5 Iss. 1, pp 65-79, published by the English Language and Foundation Studies Centre and the Centre of Excellence for Equity in Higher Education, The University of Newcastle, Australia.

[39] Productivity Commission (2020) *Mental Health*, Report no. 95, Canberra.

[40] International Association of Student Affairs and Services (2020) *Student Affairs and Services in HE: Global Foundations, Issues, and Best Practices*, Eds Roger B. Ludeman and Birgit Schreiber, Deutsches Studentenwerk, Monbijouplatz 11, 10178 Berlin Germany accessed 17 July 2020 https://www.studentenwerke.de/sites/default/files/210129_dsw_iasas_final_web.pdf p. 184.

[41] Scobie, H. and Picard, M. (2018) 'Embedding mental wellbeing in Australian regional universities: Equity interventions', *International Studies in Widening Participation*, Vol. 5 Iss. 1, pp 65-79, published by the English Language and Foundation Studies Centre and the Centre of Excellence for Equity in Higher Education, The University of Newcastle, Australia.

During consultations, providers suggested that there was a need for:

- more 'telehealth' appointments for students in regions

- more drug and alcohol counselling

- better use of data to operationalise and improve services

- more recognition of food insecurity as a source of stress for students

- leveraging of support services provided to international students to meet the similar needs of domestic students.

> **Good practice message for the Framework:** *skilled counselling staff are available to address the needs of RRR students.*

4.2.3   Academic support

While academic support is a mainstay of services provided to tertiary students, some researchers have suggested that this support should draw on the notion of 'transition pedagogy' rather than the traditional deficit approach. Through a 'strength-based approach', transition pedagogy better supports students from diverse backgrounds by embedding academic support as part of a mainstreamed, inclusive curriculum. Rather than expecting students to already have the social and cultural capital and academic skills necessary to successfully complete their studies, supportive providers instead aim to 'demystify' academic cultures and skills by creating an environment that fosters a sense of 'belonging' among students irrespective of their background.[42]

> *They provided 1:1 buddy support with teachers. If we didn't understand something they always made time to support us after class.*
>
> Annie, VET student

The consultations suggested that financial and social support are of more concern for RRR students than academic support, which they mostly appeared satisfied with. Tertiary providers are generally well-equipped to provide academic support and often the needs of RRR students for academic support are similar to those of all students. However, some points of note were raised:

- regional campuses and Regional University Centres (RUCs) can provide valued face-to-face academic support for students who are otherwise studying online. One VET trainer expressed how useful it would be to collaborate with a learning support advisor at an RUC to jointly support her students.

> *If there was one based where our students were, I would ring the learning support person. I could be helpful working through how best to support them.*

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[42] Scobie, H. and Picard, M. (2018) 'Embedding mental wellbeing in Australian regional universities: Equity interventions', *International Studies in Widening Participation*, Vol. 5 Iss. 1, pp 65-79, published by the English Language and Foundation Studies Centre and the Centre of Excellence for Equity in Higher Education, The University of Newcastle, Australia.

- online provision of academic support services, access to learning advisors and live and recorded workshops, has increased during the shift to online learning demanded by COVID-19 – these services are valuable for all students studying remotely and their ongoing provision would benefit RRR students

- tutoring and targeted academic support is provided to students in some on-campus accommodation

- one provider reported using a proactive approach to academic support by closely monitoring academic progress through cohort tracking and the use of specified triggers to identify students at risk of disengagement who are then contacted by intervention officers with expertise in the relevant academic discipline – although RRR is not specifically a trigger for intervention, RRR students may be identified in some of the 18 subgroups that are actively monitored

- peer support is valued by students and is often lacking for those studying remotely – while many providers encourage students to connect with each other, few seem to actively support connections between students

- some RRR students lack confidence in their academic capability due to their limited exposure or success in previous educational experiences – academic support is valuable for these learners, but it is most effective when provided as an integrated part of their learning program rather than under a deficit model for learners with 'special needs'

- in VET, academic support is often remedial and aimed at fixing problems, but providers suggested that a more structured and planned approach to academic support would be more effective.

Good practice message for the Framework: *skilled staff are available to assist learning for RRR students.*

4.2.4   Accommodation assistance

The Napthine Review found that relocation for study can double the cost of undertaking an undergraduate qualification.[43] Annual costs for students to live away from home while studying have been estimated in several sources, these tend to range from $15,000 - $30,000.

The lack of availability of affordable student accommodation is a recurring concern in the literature and was also identified by provider and student consultation participants. Higher education providers report that RRR students often have a preference for accommodation on campus in their first year of study. However, research indicates that on-campus accommodation at many institutions is more than RRR students can afford.[44] A report on student accommodation by Urbis found that the average weekly rent for Purpose-Built Student Accommodation in Australia in 2019 was $299.[45]

I have to work 30 to 40 hours a week just to get by – even 40 hours is only just enough to put a roof over my head. My study suffers.

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[43] Commonwealth of Australia (2019) *National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy* (Napthine Review).
[44] Universities Australia (2018) *2017 Universities Australia Student Finances Survey*, Canberra.
[45] Urbis (2019) *Student Accommodation – Mid Year Market Update 2019* viewed 3 August 2021
https://urbis.com.au/app/uploads/2019/09/P0014238-Student-Accommodation-%E2%80%93-Mid-Year-Market-Update-Condensed-Version-18092019.pdf

Off-campus accommodation near metropolitan universities is also unaffordable for many RRR students. In 2019, data from the Real Estate Institute of Australia (REIA) indicated that average share house rents in the inner suburbs of Australia's capital cities were creating housing stress for people on low incomes. Housing stress is defined as when rent costs more than 30 percent of income. REIA data for Melbourne indicated that share house rent averaged 70 percent of income for a single person on Commonwealth benefits.[46]

Living on res means that we can't avoid the support services and community. From what I've seen, the people who don't do as well are not living on res and they feel isolated and unmotivated. I also don't think everyone from rural areas understands just how beneficial res can be.

Brooke, university student

Recommendations from a 2018 assessment of regional student accommodation by Urbis focused on raising student awareness of accommodation options by providing information on the cost of living in different cities and towns and building student confidence in their ability to secure on-campus accommodation by introducing an allocation of beds for RRR students.[47]

Some universities offer an accommodation guarantee for first year students coming from outside the region. However, research by the Australian Council for Education Research (ACER) found that only three of ten profiled universities offered some form of accommodation guarantee.[48] Consultation for the project confirmed that most universities do not give preference to RRR students in securing accommodation. The availability of residential accommodation operates largely on a 'first in' basis. Preference is sometimes given to returning students because this helps to build a strong sense of community in accommodation. Returning students are often invited to reapply for accommodation before the process is opened to new applicants.[49] The priority given to returning students can exacerbate timelines for first year students who need to secure accommodation before relocating for study. Students have only limited time to make alternative arrangements if they miss out on a place in residence.[50] While 'accommodation guarantees' are offered to undergraduate students by some universities, these are not generally specifically targeted at RRR students.

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[46] Casey, S. and Ralston, L. (2019) 'City share house rents eat up most of Newstart, leaving less than $100 a week to live on', *The Conversation*, ABC News, Monday 23 September 2019, ABC News website viewed 3 August 2021 https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-09-23/city-share-house-rents-use-most-of-newstart-rental-stress/11537584.

[47] Urbis (2018) Regional student accommodation assessment, prepared for the Commonwealth Department of Education and Training.

[48] Urbis (2018) *Regional student accommodation assessment*, prepared for the Commonwealth Department of Education and Training.

[49] Urbis (2018) *Regional student accommodation assessment*, prepared for the Commonwealth Department of Education and Training.

[50] Parliament of Australia (2009) *Chapter 3: Barriers to accessing tertiary education opportunities in regional Australia*, Parliamentary Inquiry into Rural and Regional access to Secondary and Tertiary Education Opportunities.

The university stated that because I was rural and interstate that I would be guaranteed accommodation in my first year of university. That was really great to have peace of mind knowing I had somewhere to live.

Julia, university student

Research indicates that some institutions offer housing bursaries and rent assistance with priority often given to those who are relocating from interstate or regional areas.[51] In consultation, providers indicated that some scholarships supported accommodation costs and that, after first year, some students could access accommodation subsidies by taking on mentoring and support roles. However, providers reported that student demand for scholarships support exceeded availability.

Providers noted that the new Tertiary Access Payment (TAP) which commenced in 2021 offers some financial relief to relocating students. TAP provides a one-off, non-indexed, means tested payment of up to $5,000 to help RRR students relocate to access to tertiary study. The payment is currently available to students:

• undertaking full-time tertiary education (Certificate IV or above)

• in the year immediately following school (Year 12 or equivalent)

• if their family home is more than 90 minutes from their education provider.

Providers reported while TAP does provide valuable financial assistance that helps some students with relocation costs, it is only a partial contribution to the larger expense of relocating, including the cost of accommodation and the loss of income that can result from relocation. The payment is currently only available to school leavers relocation costs can be more significant for students with family responsibilities if they need to move with their family. An evaluation of TAP has recently been completed and the findings from this review will inform potential changes to the roll out of the program in 2022.

Through the consultation, students reported that the financial barriers of relocating influenced their choice of tertiary studies. They talked about sleeping in their cars when affordable accommodation was not available, about not knowing when they could afford the travel to visit home, and about having to choose online study due to the cost of relocation.

For Indigenous students, relocating can involve additional challenges associated with moving off Country. Significant financial costs can be incurred for these students due to needing to return home more regularly to participate in cultural activities.[52] Travel to remote areas is also significantly more expensive than to regional areas. For some Indigenous students, the Away from Base (AFB) Mixed-Mode program provides support for participation in an approved mixed-mode course by distance education to access compulsory course elements in another location away from their permanent home for short periods of time. AFB contributes towards the costs of travel, meals and accommodation. The funding is provided directly to the tertiary education provider – higher education or not-for-profit RTO – to help them accelerate education outcomes for Indigenous students.

For RRR students undertaking an apprenticeship, accommodation can be an issue during periods of block training that may be conducted in a regional or metropolitan centre some distance from their home and

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[51] Urbis (2018) *Regional student accommodation assessment*, prepared for the Commonwealth Department of Education and Training.
[52] Commonwealth of Australia (2019) *National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy* (Napthine Review).

workplace. Without local family or support networks, young people from RRR areas have difficulty finding appropriate, short-term accommodation. The National Apprentice Employment Network reported that this is particularly an issue for Indigenous apprentices.

Aside from the financial implications of relocating, consultations found that RRR students also need support in relation to:

- making relocation arrangements within the narrow window of time between acceptance of a place at a tertiary institution and the commencement of studies
- navigating an unfamiliar environment without any of their accustomed family and community supports.

Many providers do not specifically target RRR students for support but offer services more generally to students who were relocating for study. Although this strategy may not provide the targeted support that some RRR students would like, providers view it as a way to avoid negatively stereotyping of RRR students.

> *One reason I like how we do it is the fact that you're new*
> *to [regional city] is the thing. If we target RRR students,*
> *does that mean we think they're not going to do well?*
>
> Regional university provider

Students who don't relocate from RRR locations can still face significant costs in travelling to participate in intensive units and practicum components of their course.[53] Research suggests that even when a university is located regionally and may be a relatively short distance away from a community (such as a 45-minute drive), the lack of public transport and the high cost of fuel, can make this prohibitive for young people from low income backgrounds.[54] Consultations found that regional institutions were aware of the challenges students experienced in travelling to campus. Some had introduced responsive timetabling approaches to minimise the amount of travel required. At least one provider had accommodation available for students to book on a casual basis when attending the regional campus.

Good practice message for the Framework: *housing assistance is provided for RRR students.*

Issue for consideration 2

Students, and their advisors, would value information on scholarships and sources of financial assistance that is more easily navigable. It may be beneficial to work with tertiary education stakeholders to establish a central repository for such information that streamlines the process of searching and applying for financial assistance.

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[53] Commonwealth of Australia (2019) *National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy* (Napthine Review).
[54] Hampshire, A. (2017) *Submission to the Review into Regional, Remote and Rural Education*, The Smith Family, Sydney, p 6.

4.3   Framework element 3: Belonging

To engage effectively with their studies, RRR students indicated that they needed to feel integrated, affiliated and comfortable to participate in the academic and social life of the tertiary institution. Nurturing a sense of belonging therefore emerged as an element of good practice support services provision.

4.3.1   Connection and identity

Student connection and belonging are widely believed to positively impact mental health and wellbeing. Some providers suggested that a sense of belonging has to be built into the curriculum through upskilling of academic staff and the provision of wrap around services. Some RRR students reported feeling disconnected and excluded from the culture of the educational institution due to the attitudes and assumptions of academic staff and other students.

> *If you're a RRR student, you either have that as part of your identity and are proud of it and you find other RRR students. Or there are people who hide it because they really want to fit in with everyone else. Everyone assumes you're from Sydney and Melbourne. They don't even know where Dubbo is. If RRR students had a chance to get together early on, that would be good.*
>
> Grace, studying at a metro university

One student reported that a RRR student society at her university was valuable for helping students adjust to university and develop a sense of belonging. However, as a student-run organisation rather than an official university service, it is difficult to generate widespread awareness among students due to an apparent reluctance by the university to be seen preferencing one student society by promoting it. Students from another university reported disappointment that they had not heard about the student-run RRR student society until their final year.

> *It's helpful to link RRR students with each other. Not to just have them stick together but just so they have a connection with people who are going through the same things.*
>
> Marnie, University student

During consultation, one provider reported that more students are prioritising their own work/life balance by reducing their study loads and shifting to online or mixed mode programs, but this can also lead to less connection with the education provider. Other providers indicated that the extent of remote learning required due to COVID-19 in 2020-21 has also impacted student connection and belonging.

Good practice message for the Framework: *identify and background is respected and connections proactively forged.*

4.3.2   Support to settle into study

The need to support all students with the transition into tertiary study is widely recognised. Many providers focus their support services on the requirements of new students in their first year. The First Year Experience (FYE) programs at some institutions embody this focus on ensuring students are effectively supported as they settle into study.

Some providers noted that students needed to be nurtured initially to bridge the gap between school and tertiary education. But few providers reported that they had transition or orientation programs that were specifically targeted for RRR students, although additional activities may be offered to RRR students by student societies or on-campus accommodation provided. For some university students, orientation was described as a blur with so much going on that they could not necessarily take in the information being provided on support services available to them.

A VET provider reported that the first 100 days of an apprenticeship included 4 stages of learning where the provider actively checked in with apprentices to provide support and monitor any issues before they could escalate. VET students talked about the value of induction activities that helped them connect with the people in their new learning environment. Induction helped them get established and made them more comfortable asking for advice later in their program.

Support to settle into study is also needed by students studying online. One online provider reported conducting one-on-one consultations for orientation with students at the beginning of the study period. The sessions are 45-minute discussions that walk students through the available support services and identify anything that might create a barrier for the student such as internet access, transport, or workplace issues.

> *If I'd turned to Mum for support when I was finding things difficult, she would have just said to come home. My parents are great but they never went to uni so I couldn't get the support I needed from her. I needed support but I didn't want someone to suggest I should go home.*
>
> Toni, university student

During consultation several providers identified opportunities to improve their orientation programs to benefit RRR students:

- Some individuals with experience from North America highlighted the more intensive approach taken to transition and orientation support by tertiary providers in Canada and the USA. Because a significant proportion of North American students relocate to attend tertiary education, there is greater focus on orientation support for family members – helping them to feel comfortable about the new environment their student is entering and helping them understand how they can provide support.

- One university representative reported having very high numbers of first-in-family students attending the university. The families of those students don't know how best to support their learner: they don't know when to ask about assignments; or the implications of census data for incurring a debt. An orientation program directed at families would put them in a better position to

support their student. Family-friendly orientation activities, on-campus activities, information sessions and network events were also recommended in the research.[55]

- Another provider suggested that it might be valuable to introduce regular touch points during the first periods of study for RRR students to look more closely at their engagement and progression. More pro-active case-management and data to examine and review academic progress is seen as potentially necessary for future reporting when the new Indigenous, Regional and Low SES Attainment Fund (IRLSAF) model is designed and implemented under the Job Ready Graduate program.

Although support to settle into study is critical, research data shows that transition support needs to be ongoing, rather than focused only in the first year. This was reinforced in consultation with providers and peak bodies. For RRR students, the support needed in second and subsequent years may relate to their changing living conditions and increasing independence, such as moving out of on-campus accommodation and balancing study with family life, employment or community responsibilities.

Good practice message for the Framework: *transition and first year support is provided for RRR students.*

4.3.3 Mentoring

Mentoring programs were identified by many providers as a mechanism to provide support to students and strengthen belonging. Students and providers reported that for RRR students, connections with other RRR students were a valued source of comfort and guidance.

> *A buddy/mentor program with someone from a remote location would have been handy. I didn't have family or anyone I knew in Melbourne. I had no idea what to expect. It would have been good to have someone with experience who could have helped with study and settling in.*
>
> Dean, studying at a metro university

Many of the providers consulted indicated that they would like to support more mentoring initiatives, but most have found that programs had lapsed or fallen away during COVID-19. This was particularly true where the programs were the responsibility of student-led organisations. One provider reported that mentoring was one of the first activities students pulled out of during that time, even though the program had previously been strong.

Due to the shift to more online learning, one provider reported that they were establishing an online platform for peer-to-peer mentoring and tutoring to support remote students. Three streams were being established to support different student cohorts: international students, Indigenous students, and students in residence. Mentors were provided with training to equip them to monitor online misconduct and cyber bullying. The platform aims to provide academic and social support to students.

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[55] Nelson, K., Picton, C., McMilan, J., Edwards, D., Devlin, M. and Martin, K. (n.d.) *Understanding the completion patterns of equity students in regional universities*, National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, University of Southern Cross, Federation University, Regional Universities Network.

> *Mentoring has been imperative as far as ongoing support is concerned. For me it's been so positive. There have been times when it's felt too overwhelming and it's been really helpful to have that support and someone to remind you of your strengths.*
>
> Michelle, studying at a regional university campus

One university has identified mentors for online students based in the regional location where the student is studying. This face to face support, provided in place, has proved critical to success for these students.

> *For a student struggling to stay in their studies in Wagga I found a masters level high performing student who lives in Wagga. We pay her as a student support officer to meet with the student in need, helping her navigate online resources and work out how to make the most of her studies. This has been an instrumental strategy for success.*
>
> Learning support manager, regional university

Several providers indicated that they had identified individual students who would benefit from having a mentor but it was difficult to match them with a suitable peer due to the small size of the organisation. One provider also felt that the initiative should be student-led but the students were unwilling to organise anything for themselves.

> *I was a mentee and a mentor, but the university expected students to run the program and they're the ones that need support.*
>
> Monique, university student

Not all students expressed an interest in mentoring. One online learner felt that she would find it difficult to maintain a mentoring relationship over distance.

Good practice message for the Framework: *a mentor or buddy system is available for RRR students.*

4.3.4   Indigenous perspectives and cultural competency

For Indigenous students, who are a very small minority in many educational institutions, it can be important to have access to culturally safe spaces, Indigenous role models and curriculum that recognises Indigenous and Western knowledge systems. Many providers have Indigenous centres focused on providing welcoming facilities, academic assistance and tailored support to Indigenous students.

Several providers, particularly in the VET sector, stressed the value of providing programs that enable Indigenous students to engage in tertiary education without having to relocate. A variety of delivery modes were described including:

- Establishing campuses or learning facilities in Indigenous communities in partnership with community elders
- Delivering training on Country with visiting trainers and assessors
- Delivering fully online programs
- Combining online programs with assessment conducted in local towns
- Delivering 50% online and 50% in regional TAFE locations
- Facilitating short, intense 'away from base' programs

However, providers experience difficulty achieving the student numbers to support financial viability.

Although many of the providers consulted had well-developed programs and services specifically for Indigenous students, some of the students consulted reported having difficulty finding appropriate support.

> *I think Indigenous populations need extra support. They're from an oral culture. Courses are much more tailored to readers and writers and Indigenous people are more kinesthetic and oral learners. Online learning is difficult for them.*
>
> Christine, studying VET through RUC

In consultation one student observed that, although both groups may be RRR students, Indigenous and non-Indigenous students are often culturally different from one another. Unfortunately, in their experience, some non-Indigenous RRR students hold racist views which could cause conflict or discomfort in a campus setting.

One student also pointed out that a better understanding of Indigenous culture, across the institution, would be helpful, for example in understanding cultural responsibilities around funerals.

> *Unis don't understand funerals. When someone passes away, it might last weeks. Even just the travel. There was a period where a family member had passed, I had to hone it in to the academic concessions people why it would take more than a couple days.*
>
> Jacob, attending a metro university

Good practice message for the Framework: *Indigenous context is present in service delivery.*

4.3.5   Community outreach and engagement

Research indicates that more than 90% of universities conduct community outreach programs in RRR locations.[56] Universities invest considerable effort in outreach and take pride in their programs that reach a

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[56] Matthews, D., Milgate, G and Clarke, L. (2018) *Assessment of university support services for regional and remote students on transition to university: Final Report,* prepared by Australian Council for Educational Research for the Commonwealth Department of Education and Training.

significant number of regional communities and have been shown to raise aspirations for RRR students to pursue post-secondary education.[57]

Through the consultations, university providers identified their outreach programs as a mechanism to attract RRR students and diversify their student cohort. Some providers highlighted the importance of outreach programs to begin building a sense of belonging by showing RRR students that universities can be a place for them.

> *Information needs to be provided pre-enrolment so*
> *potential students can make informed decisions.*
> Krystal, studying VET online with TAFE

Table A universities are able to use HEPPP funding to support outreach activities. However, some stakeholders have suggested that, beyond outreach, regional engagement by universities should:

- Contribute to regional, rural and remote communities in ways which extend beyond the provision of education, such as through the provision of internships or training placements for students from a range of disciplines, including health, allied health, and counselling in these communities.[58]
- Cultivate partnerships with organisations in remote Australia to create valuable learning and enrichment opportunities for students.[59]

Through the consultation, one student suggested that universities could employ RRR students to be involved in outreach programs – capitalising on their lived experience and providing them with a needed source of income at the same time. Another student reported that she had been employed casually by her university in a Student Ambassador program to assist with promotion.

A long-running collaboration in Queensland[60] has a specific objective of eliminating gaps and duplication in university outreach activities to avoid the problem of some schools being over-serviced and others underserviced. The Widening Tertiary Participation Consortium works to improve tertiary education participation of people from low socio-economic status backgrounds, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and people from RRR locations. The consortium was mentioned by consultation participants as an example of co-ordinated outreach activity that promotes tertiary options rather than markets courses at individual providers.

Except for major TAFE institutes, community outreach may not be as extensive an activity for VET providers. Engagement with industry is required of VET providers and can sometimes overlap with community activities. Responsibility for awareness raising about VET pathways is taken at various times by the Commonwealth and State and Territory governments, industry associations and some large RTOs.

For regional education providers, engaging with the local community is frequently about becoming part of the community by creating a presence and recognition. Through consultation, regional providers reported on the varied ways that they contributed to the economic development and community wellbeing of their

[57] Thomson, V. (2019) *Go8 Submission: Regional, Rural and Remote Education Strategy*, Group of Eight Australia, viewed 4 July 2021 https://go8.edu.au/go8-submission-regional-rural-and-remote-education-strategy

[58] Hampshire, A. (2017) *Submission to the Review into Regional, Remote and Rural Education*, The Smith Family, Sydney.

[59] Pollard, L. (2018) *Remote Student University Success: An analysis of policy and practice*, National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education and The University of Western Australia, Perth.

[60] National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (n.d.) https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/queensland-widening-participation-consortium/

region. Providers, and their local communities, are aware that the education and training they provide encourages people to stay in the region – taking up professional and skilled jobs and running businesses.

Regional providers can also connect their communities with other valuable services. A regional university campus or TAFE college can be a hub or incubator for other government and industry activity. One provider described how their campus' contract with the Department of Rural Health has brought a range of health services to the town through a regional placement program for city-based final year students in nursing and allied health. The program has the added benefit of showcasing career pathways for local secondary students.

The regional providers consulted described strategies they used to connect with their communities:

- sponsoring local sporting teams and arts events can link the provider to sources of local pride
- providing extension learning activities for local schools can raise awareness among parents, teachers and students of the education opportunities available locally.

> *I do local ABC radio once a month and sometimes take students in to share their experience. People hear them and consider being a student as well.*
>
> Regional university campus manager

Good practice message for the Framework: *outreach is made into areas where RRR students reside.*

Issue for consideration 3

Despite outreach initiatives by tertiary providers, RRR people are not aware of all tertiary education options available to them. More co-ordinated approaches to community outreach and engagement that bring together VET and higher education providers and RUCs may serve to raise awareness and assist informed decision making.

4.4   Framework element 4: Engagement

For support services to benefit RRR students, it is essential that they are aware of the services available and how to interact with them. Establishing effective mechanisms for engagement and communication emerged as an element of good practice support services provision.

4.4.1   Proactive and specialised communications

Many students reported being overwhelmed by the amount of information they received from their tertiary provider at the beginning of their course. At the same time, some students reported that information on support services was difficult to find. Many said they would like to receive more consistent communication over time to maintain a connection and remind them of the services available.

Suggestions from students for improving the way that information about support services was communicated were varied, reflecting the different preferences of individuals. They included:

- Spread the information out more so that just the essentials are communicated at the start with extra information later.
- Provide an information booklet with everything in it that can be accessed on campus and provided to students on orientation day in an information pack.
- Send regular reminders about services that you might need at particular times.
- Put flyers in student common rooms.
- Make support services visible on the provider website.
- Share information about support services through the learning management system.
- Use social media and interactive websites more to promote services.

> *I wouldn't have responded well to more emails offering support. A more personalised approach would have worked better for me.*
>
> Jess, university student

Several students said that they knew about the available services but were not confident enough to access them early in their studies. Some said they would be more likely to respond to a personalised communication approach and advocated for a proactive personal connection – once per semester was suggested as appropriate.

> *Regular contact from the uni would be good. It can feel like you're forgotten a bit.*
>
> Phillip, university student

Some providers use email segmentation to direct certain information to only the student cohorts that need it, although none said they had specifically segmented email communication to RRR students. One provider reported that they didn't send dedicated emails to RRR students because they did not want people to fall through the cracks if they failed to identify them as being in a particular group.

Phone call or SMS check-ins are preferred by some students because 'emails are too easy to ignore'. One student studying online through an RUC reported that the Head of Faculty visited during her first year, to 'touch base'. In the student's opinion, this personalised approach gives students a real boost.

Some students suggested that communication about support services would be more effective if it was triggered by specific events, such as for stress relief at exam time and academic counselling if a student makes an enquiry about dropping out or switching courses.

Several providers reported on approaches they have used to personalise communication with students. These include:

- Making phone calls to every student to check in with them when COVID-19 lockdowns came into effect. Everyone from the Vice Chancellor down was manning the phones.
- Using multi modal avenues of communication – a student announcement email once a week, social media platforms, personal phone calls twice each semester, and personalised emails from student services on a regular basis to make sure they have the support they need.

- Connecting with students before they arrive via email and phone calls from the residential support team to check whether students need any help with preparations to live on campus. They arrive with greater confidence and settle in faster.

- Keeping email for core business and using social media platforms and a student-led website to enhance sense of belonging. Employing recent graduates to drive social media activity and connect students with the university and with each other.

- Sending welfare check texts during lockdown and following up with phone calls if students provide a prompt response.

> *The pastoral care person who looks after rural and remote students gets in touch regularly to see how I'm going and if there's anything she can help with. Having someone who specifically looks after RRR students has made a real positive difference. We have different issues out here, like struggling with technology. It's good to know there's someone I can call.*
> Brittany, student at an independent higher education provider

Good practice message for the Framework: *communication with RRR students is targeted and timed to align with need.*

4.4.2   Student awareness of availability of support services

Some of the providers consulted felt that they needed to do more to promote their services to students while others believed they had tried every possible channel and still failed to reach all students.

> *You get the same students accessing all support services, those who are aware keep coming back but we are not getting the word out to others. It always seems to be by word of mouth.*
> Private University provider

The support services available to tertiary students cover a wide range of programs, policies, processes and products. It is unsurprising that students may be confused by the variety of services and the complicated network of service providers. One research paper suggested that 'one of the paradoxes of higher education is that students who may need support are those who are less likely to access it.'[61]

> *Most people won't ask for help, but if it's offered in a personal way, I'll accept it.*
> Moses, university student

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[61] Lizzio, A. and Wilson, K.L. (2013) 'Early intervention to support the academic recovery of first-year students at risk of non-continuation', *Innovations in Education and Training International* 50(2) May 2013.

In one research study, students indicated that they were unaware of their university's student support services until they needed them.[62] This was confirmed through the consultation with students and providers. Although students reported higher levels of awareness at some institutes than others, the consultation sample was not large enough to draw conclusions about whether this was being addressed more effectively by certain types of tertiary provider.

Some providers reported that getting students to engage with the available support services was their biggest challenge. There was a view that it was always the same students who engaged with the supports offered – workshops, mentoring, study groups, counselling, career advice – while some students remained unreachable. Many providers expressed interest in knowing how others were grappling with this issue and learning about new ways to connect with students and deliver services.

> **Good practice message for the Framework:** *clear, consistent messaging raises awareness and understanding of support services.*

4.4.3   Online support services

Consultation with providers found that some have recently adopted outsourced solutions or have partnered with app developers to deliver aspects of their support services. For some providers this has been driven by the urgent need to deliver services online during COVID-19 restrictions.

> *With study moving online, a lot of support services have also moved online. Some university administrators think that's a good thing, but students don't necessarily like it.*
>
> Regional university campus manager

One independent higher education provider explained how the shift to online learning forced them to re-think program requirements to ensure students received the same level of support as they had previously. Changes included providing complimentary learning resources that were previously accessed through on-campus libraries, scheduling telephone consultations with academic learning advisors and career coaches, and establishing internships that could be completed remotely.

A regional VET provider found that online support services gave them better access and penetration with students, allowing rapport building, as youth are sometimes more comfortable in the virtual environment than face to face.

Online platforms and systems that tertiary providers reported introducing to deliver support services include:

- Peer-to-peer mentoring and support to connect students
- Online booking systems for support services
- Case management systems to monitor and manage complaints, misconduct and other risk factors

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[62] Crawford, N. (2021) *"On the radar": Supporting the mental wellbeing of mature-aged students in regional and remote Australia*, Equity Fellowship Report, National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education and University of Tasmania, Perth.

- Central concierge and referral service
- Phone counselling.

> *Sonder is a wellbeing app we can access. If you're walking home at night and not feeling safe – you can use it anywhere.*
> Sonia, independent higher education student

Good practice message for the Framework: *RRR students are engaged in support services using technology in interactive and effective ways.*

4.4.4   Online or distance students

Some universities have a significant number of students studying externally (80% of students at the University of New England). While distance education is an option for students who are geographically isolated, it is also accessed by students in all locations to suit their life circumstances.[63] The availability of online programs has increased the accessibility of higher education. Studying online is a cost-effective way for remote students to access higher education that does not require students to relocate. Through the consultations, some students reported that online learning gave them the flexibility they needed to fit study into their own work and sleep schedules. However, online students also need to be appropriately supported to achieve success while being geographically isolated.[64] Provider bodies advised that RRR students learning remotely need support to navigate the online space and to maintain connections with their peers online.

> *Last week the college had a week long conference – mid-term, but they put everything up online for me. I don't feel like I'm missing out on anything. I'm paying fees and can't attend but they make sure we can access everything.*
> Brittany, studying online with an independent higher education provider

In 2020 and 2021, COVID-19 restrictions saw a huge increase in online delivery to all students. While some tertiary students have benefited from the shift to more online learning due to increased flexibility of timetabling and a reduced need for travel, providers say that the shift has highlighted a significant technological divide.

Through the consultations, providers reported that RRR students were more likely than others to have issues with technology or internet access. In the shift to online learning, some providers gave grants to RRR students to buy computers and others took computers from their closed libraries to mail to students in RRR locations. But supplying computer hardware cannot address all connectivity issues. Despite acknowledged

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[63] Parliament of Australia (2009) *Chapter 3: Barriers to accessing tertiary education opportunities in regional Australia*, Parliamentary Inquiry into Rural and Regional access to Secondary and Tertiary Education Opportunities.
[64] Pollard, L. (2018) *Remote Student University Success: An analysis of policy and practice*, National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education and The University of Western Australia, Perth.

improvements in internet coverage across Australia, reliable internet connectivity, required for downloads, uploads and accessing meetings, is still an issue in many RRR locations. Providers noted that for RRR students access and affordability is unequal to that experienced by city-based students. It is understood that the Regional Education Commissioner will lead a project to investigate internet connectivity that has potential to inform considerations for how to support RRR students.

Variations in the capability of providers to offer programs and support services online has also been evident during this period. Some regional universities that had extensive online delivery pre-COVID have been able to transition more readily than those with an emphasis on face-to-face delivery and hands-on practical learning. The urgent pivot to online learning prompted many providers to think creatively about ways to engage and support learners in the online environment.

> *I found online study to be the best way for me because it is very self-directed. All the classes are recorded so I can jump on when I can. I haven't particularly accessed any support services as I feel fairly fine with how I am going so far, but I do know where they are as they are advertising them all the time. There is nothing specific for regional remote students because I suppose it is all online.*
>
> Dana, university student

Provider and student experiences have been varied during this time:

- One university provider reported that students at their regional campus were not keen on the shift to online support services and were concerned about reduced access to face-to-face support.

- A regional university provider suspects that regional students studying online have issues with connectivity, communication and isolation that are not being addressed as effectively as the provider would like.

- One metro-based VET provider has found that online delivery is preferred by apprentices for whom attending the metro campus is anxiety-inducing, but higher-level language, literacy and numeracy skills are needed to learn effectively online.

- A dual-sector provider has found that online learning for lower-level VET qualifications is hampered by poor internet connectivity and poor foundation skills of learners, but learners studying diploma qualifications and above are more likely to be in a professional environment with internet access through clinics, hospitals and educational institutions.

- A private VET provider has established a successful hybrid delivery system that allows participants to join all sessions virtually as they are running live in the classroom. The hybrid approach addresses two issues that emerged during COVID-19 online learning: the need for students to participate in group work and the desire for faster feedback from facilitators.

- Students at a private VET provider found that an online program that incorporated face-to-face delivery through a residential component achieved good completion rates by giving learners the opportunity to undertake some study away from the responsibilities of the home environment.

Providers recognise that online delivery will continue to grow even as face-to-face programs resume post-COVID. Creating effective programs, support services and engagement activities is a key focus with several providers indicating that they have recruited new staff or formed new teams to tackle these challenges.

Providers are also turning to data driven tools to measure and monitor online student engagement that will help them to take proactive approaches to prevent disengagement and drop-outs.

> **Good practice message for the Framework:** *students not attending in person are engaged through ongoing outreach and relationship building.*

Issue for consideration 4

Technological disadvantage experienced in some RRR locations is a barrier to participation in tertiary education and will be the subject of a planned investigation by the Regional Education Commissioner. Expanding the RUC model through partnerships with other regional facilities such as libraries, community centres and TAFE campuses, may enable more RRR students to engage successfully through online programs.

4.5   Framework element 5: Knowledge

Consultation with providers revealed a need for knowledge to be developed and used to improve services for RRR students. Sourcing, understanding and using knowledge emerged as a key element of good practice.

4.5.1   Monitoring of needs and responses

Through the consultations, many providers indicated that there is more they could do to identify and understand the support needs of their RRR students. There was considerable interest in unpacking data to understand which groups of students were taking up support services and how that is impacting retention and achievement.

> *The sector as a whole is not good at identifying RRR students and the nuances and differences between rural and regional and remote.*
>
> Peak provider representative

Some of the providers consulted said they have plans to improve their data collection and interrogation:

- One public university said they were starting a longitudinal study with the 2021 undergraduate cohort. Students will be surveyed twice per year over the course of their degree on their support needs and use of support services. The university will be able to interrogate the data by student demographic including RRR status.

- One private university has acquired new case management systems that enable closer monitoring and tracking of how students are interacting with support services. The systems enable early intervention by proactively identifying students at risk.

- A public university is taking a deep dive into the outcomes data for their regional campuses to understand more about how student survey data relates to employment outcomes.

- One regional university has earmarked HEPPP funding to conduct a formal evaluation of outcomes from HEPPP. The project will develop evaluation tools that can be used in future to build the evaluative capacity of the university.

4.5.2   Prioritising resources and funding

As already noted, in consultation many providers indicated that they did not target support services specifically at RRR students and some were not able to accurately identify RRR students within their student management systems. This could be the case for VET providers and independent higher education providers who are not eligible for HEPPP funding or other subsidies directed at RRR students so have no reason to separately identify them.

> *When you fill in your application, they should be able to see straight away that you're a RRR student. They should reach out proactively, call you to let you know what supports are available.*
>
> Toni, university student

One regional university has invested in a data management system that makes data accessible for all staff. A dashboard displays aggregated data that tells lecturers about their students – details like first in family, age, educational background and maps of where students come from. The lecturers are expected to review student demographics before class to consider how they may impact student success. The university has data analysts to help staff with data mining. They have noticed that early career teachers appear to be more interested in accessing and using the data, while some of the more experienced teachers do not believe that students' circumstances or support needs are their business.

A Group Training Organisation in the VET sector uses data management to track student engagement – completions, cancellations and attrition – to gauge where and when support is most often needed. Data on home postcode and feedback from students and host employers is also used to interrogate and understand student outcomes.

4.5.3   Ongoing improvement

Some providers expressed interest in understanding more about how data from student engagement with support services could be used to inform the development and enhancement of services. Some were also conscious that a more nuanced view of what constitutes a successful outcome for students may be necessary to properly interpret the data.

> *Most unis are collecting data, but is it used in sophisticated ways? Large providers can have decentralised systems and may not link up issues. Is collected data used as a diagnostic tool for early intervention or to better target resources?*
>
> Education quality agency

One VET provider has interrogated their student data to understand demand for counselling services. They found that fewer students in RRR areas were taking up counselling but those who did use the service needed a higher number of sessions than metro students. The finding suggested that RRR students have more complex counselling needs so adjustments have been made to the structure and duration of therapy sessions.

Additionally, the VET provider data revealed that engagement with student services reduced during lockdowns but then spiked when lockdowns ended. The provider initiated more proactive outreach during lockdown to check in on students to intervene before issues escalated.

While many providers are keen to use data to monitor student engagement and use early intervention to support students who are at risk. Research has found that enrolment in higher education contributes to better labour market outcomes for individuals, even without degree completion.[65] This has led some stakeholders to suggest a revision of the notion that dropping out is a purely negative outcome.

One higher education provider suggested that successful outcomes could be identified more clearly if individuals could be tracked throughout the education system to understand pathways that might see them disengaging from a TAFE program but shifting into higher education, or vice versa. Sometimes dropping out of a particular tertiary education program enables students to access a pathway that is better suited to their needs.

National student surveys gather information on student satisfaction with support services in VET and higher education. Findings from recent surveys indicate that:

- VET student satisfaction with support services is higher among remote students than those from regional or metropolitan areas (81.6% vs 79.5% vs 78.7%) and highest amongst Indigenous students (84.4%)[66]

- Higher education student satisfaction with student support is also slightly higher among regional/remote students than metropolitan students (76% vs 74%) and satisfaction of Indigenous students is higher than non-Indigenous (77% vs 74%)[67]

- External higher education students are more satisfied than internal/mixed study mode students (77% vs 73%)[68]

- Despite an overall fall in student satisfaction with the quality of the entire education experience during the year impacted by COVID-19, the level of student satisfaction with support services specifically was virtually unchanged from 2019.

[65] Nelson, K., Picton, C., McMilan, J., Edwards, D., Devlin, M. and Martin, K. (n.d.) *Understanding the completion patterns of equity students in regional universities*, National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, University of Southern Cross, Federation University, Regional Universities Network.

[66] National Centre for Vocational Education Research (2021) *Student outcomes survey*, Adelaide.

[67] QILT (2020) *2020 Student Experience Survey.*

[68] QILT (2020) *2020 Student Experience Survey.*

These findings are somewhat confounding for a project based on the premise that support services for RRR students need to be improved. One of the tertiary providers consulted suggested that student experience survey results for regional providers may be affected by a 'courtesy bias' whereby students are appreciative of the availability of regional education and reluctant to criticise a local facility. Others suggested that all students, including those from RRR locations, have higher expectations of, and demand more from, the largely metropolitan providers that are perceived to be higher cost and higher prestige. Despite these provider interpretations of RRR student perspectives, the consultations with RRR students identified a mixture of shortcomings and successes in the support services provided to them. The issues they raised most frequently as areas of concern are not picked up by the student experience survey. For relocating students these issues are access to accommodation and financial barriers. For online students the issues are internet connectivity and isolation. And for regional students, issues relate to work-life balance.

In contrast, survey items on student support relate to:

- efficiency of enrolment and admissions processes
- relevance and helpfulness of induction/orientation activities
- support received to settle into study
- availability and helpfulness of administrative staff or systems
- availability and helpfulness of careers advisors
- availability and helpfulness of academic or learning advisors
- availability and helpfulness of student services
- offer of support relevant to circumstances
- receipt of appropriate English language skills support.

It is conceivable that RRR students do not expect tertiary provider support services to solve some of the most significant challenges they are facing, but it is also unclear how or where they could provide feedback on their dissatisfaction with specific issues such as the availability of accommodation support or financial assistance. Without greater clarity on what survey respondents expect from support services, it is not possible to make sense of the variation in responses by demographic group.

During consultations some providers expressed interest in gathering more information from RRR students on their support needs and experiences.

Good practice message for the Framework: *incremental and breakthrough improvements are actively implemented and are informed by data.*

4.5.4   Sharing of good practice

During consultation, providers emphasised the value of learning from the experiences of other providers. Some providers spoke about connecting with other similar providers through formal or informal networks and using the opportunity to benchmark their practice against others. They also reported learning about new practices or tools based on what others were doing.

Sources of information on good practice that were identified by providers included tertiary education sector research and reviews, conferences and journals, and regulator publications. Many providers expressed interest in having further opportunities to share good practice between institutions.

One peak provider body noted that support services providers themselves need support to help students solve problems. They suggested that support services providers would benefit from opportunities to share knowledge amongst themselves and learn from each other. Information that would be valuable to share was identified as:

- Student testimonials on what support has made a difference for them
- Case studies showcasing the impact of implementing new practices
- Provider role models with the expertise to show others how to improve.

The providers consulted were enthusiastic about the development of a guide that could serve as a source of ideas and inspiration.

Good practice message for the Framework: *learning communities are formed within and between education providers.*

Issue for consideration 5

Shared information on good practice can help tertiary providers make wise investments in proven systems and solutions to build their internal capability for knowledge management. Establishing mechanisms for knowledge sharing across the tertiary sector will give providers opportunities to learn about what works.

5 Broader policy issues

5.1 Pathways and preparation

Research points to the value of enabling programs for supporting the academic needs of RRR students and facilitating student interactions and connections.[69] Enabling programs attract a high proportion of non-traditional students, many of whom can then successfully progress to Bachelor degree level.[70]

Through the consultation, the value of enabling and preparatory programs was identified by a number of higher education and VET providers. Providers recognise that enabling and preparatory programs can lead to improved retention and more successful outcomes. The programs can:

- build confidence for students who have not been supported through previous education experiences
- ensure that students are prepared for transition and equipped to succeed
- support cultural safety for Indigenous students learning to work in two worlds
- turn students into change agents who are able to help others.

Funding through the Indigenous Student Support Program (ISSP) can be used by Table A and B universities for the delivery of preparatory programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Some universities indicated that they offered free pathway programs with no prerequisites for Indigenous students, and low-cost programs for anyone over 18 years of age.

Many providers felt that more free pathway programs were needed for students who do not have the required ATAR for direct course entry, for students who are not confident, for mature aged students with limited schooling, and for students who are first in family – RRR students are disproportionately represented in all these categories. Some providers suggested that pathway programs could be designed as an academic taster to give students a safe space to work out whether tertiary education is for them. Some stakeholders suggested that universities should have an obligation to provide better pathways to ensure that students are equipped to succeed and supported through their transition into tertiary education.

> *We have a lot of mature students from RRR areas who didn't make it through school. It would be good to offer them a free introductory course that prepares them for higher education. Often these individuals have low confidence but turn out to be the best students.*
>
> Higher education provider

One provider warned that care should be taken when considering how to measure the success of pathway programs. Successful outcomes for individuals may not always be transition into a tertiary qualification. For some, the program may equip them with the skills and insights to choose an alternative path.

Other providers pointed out that nested learning programs can be beneficial for students who struggle with a long-term commitment to tertiary education. VET entry pathways can be linked to higher education qualifications with multiple exit points along the way – at diploma and associate degree level – with

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[69] Crawford, N. (2021) *"On the radar": Supporting the mental wellbeing of mature-aged students in regional and remote Australia*, Equity Fellowship Report, National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education and University of Tasmania, Perth.
[70] Lisciandro, J. G., and Gibbs, G. (2016) 'OnTrack to university: understanding mechanisms of student retention in an Australian pre-university enabling program', *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*, Volume 56, Number 2, July 2016, Murdoch University.

associated career options. The staged or scaffolded approach to achievement helps to build student confidence and motivation if they can see that there are options to leave with recognised outcomes at various points. Providers suggested that this approach can work well in regional areas where students may lack confidence or be initially unsure of their ability to complete a bachelor's degree.

Issue for consideration 6

Tertiary providers recognise the value of preparatory programs for ensuring that RRR students are equipped to succeed. Supporting the development of programs that can be delivered in regional areas through VET may provide students with supported pathways into tertiary education either locally or through relocation.

5.2   Support services in regional locations

Past research has indicated that for the first degree, students, particularly school leavers, want a face-to-face experience.[71] Although the potential offered by online learning has expanded in the years since that research, the message that distance education should not replace on-campus study where that is a student's preferred study option, remains relevant. The Regional Universities Network has advocated for supporting students to remain in their local areas, rather than relocating to study where that is the preference of the student.[72]

The availability of tertiary education in regional areas is particularly beneficial for mature age students who often do not have the flexibility of lifestyle that enables relocation.[73] Consultations for the project confirmed this research finding and highlighted the importance of regionally located providers to their communities. Regional providers are valued by local communities for delivering the skills needed locally, including those of teachers, nurses, tradespeople, accountants and community health workers.

> *Learners stay in the local community because we can*
> *connect them with industry networks in their local area.*
>
> Regional provider

The Napthine Review found that RRR VET students are more likely to be studying locally or at a regional institution, which are often supportive and responsive to RRR student needs.[74] More broadly, regional tertiary providers are seen as well-placed to provide personalised and contextual support for RRR students. The smaller size of regional campuses means that academic and professional staff can be better informed about what is going on across the whole organisation and that knowledge and awareness is easily shared with students through informal interaction in the community.

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[71] Parliament of Australia (2009) *Chapter 3: Barriers to accessing tertiary education opportunities in regional Australia*, Parliamentary Inquiry into Rural and Regional access to Secondary and Tertiary Education Opportunities.

[72] Regional Universities Network (n.d.) *Submission from the Regional Universities Network on the National Regional, Rural and Remote (RRR) Education Strategy Framing Paper.*

[73] Crawford, N. (2021) *"On the radar": Supporting the mental wellbeing of mature-aged students in regional and remote Australia*, Equity Fellowship Report, National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education and University of Tasmania, Perth.

[74] Commonwealth of Australia (2019) *National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy* (Napthine Review).

> *When we meet students in the supermarket, we can tell them about what's happening.*
>
> Regional provider

Through the consultations, several providers spoke about the greater involvement that regional lecturers have in students' lives. One provider reported that academics who choose to work on regional campuses are there because they care about supporting students. Students also talked about how much they valued the personalised help and attention available to them from lecturers and trainers at regional providers. However, some of those consulted felt that the additional care provided by regional academic staff is not necessarily resourced or recognised by the tertiary institution.

Valued features of regional delivery were identified through consultation:

- Smaller campuses mean there is less chance of students falling through cracks.
- The campus is an asset and hub that provides wider benefits to the local community as a source of information and expertise, and a facility for sport, school education and community events.
- Regional tertiary providers may be co-located with other learning facilities providing opportunities for collaboration and supported student transitions.
- Partnerships with Indigenous communities as co-tenants of learning centres offer opportunities for learners to remain on Country in their community to undertake training.

> *I would love to study in a regional centre. It's hard studying away from home because of the lack of connection.*
>
> Caitlin, studying VET at TAFE

However, thin markets can create a financial viability challenge for provision in regional areas. Regional universities have previously pointed out the higher cost of delivering higher education in regional areas and emphasised the importance of additional funding through the regional loading.[75]

Regional campuses of metro universities comprise a tiny proportion of the total student enrolment (e.g. one regional campus has 500 students in a student population of 38,000 across the whole university). It can be difficult to justify the face-to-face provision of all services that are offered on metro campuses. Support services may instead be offered online from a centralised platform or at infrequent times when metro-based professional staff visit the region. One consultation participant suggested that the lack of formal support services offered at regional institutions was the reason why regional academic staff take greater responsibility for pastoral care. Although regional providers are proud of the responsive and accessible way their staff interact with students, there was also a suggestion that this extra workload needed to be acknowledged.

Regional University Centres (RUCs) provide student support and campus-style facilities in regional areas for students who study online. The Centres are designed to enable RRR students to access and complete higher education without having to leave their community.

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[75] House of representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training (2020) *Education in remote and complex environments*.

> *The uni centre (RUC) opened in April, and it's really made a difference. You can have an office to yourself. The manager always checks in. It's like a uni library. Even though students are doing different courses, they have something in common so it's a bit of a uni experience.*
>
> Trine, studying online through RUC

Through the consultations, students and other stakeholders praised the RUC initiative. RUCs were identified as particularly valuable for older students returning to education who are unable to relocate. For many of these students, physical facilities and face-to-face support in their local community provides them with a significant boost in confidence in their ability to successfully study online. By providing a combination of infrastructure (high speed internet, somewhere quiet to study) and support services (pastoral care, learning skills advisors, someone to talk to about an assignment, connections with other learners) RUCs can transform the online learning experience for students.

> *A closed room is very important. I have four kids so need somewhere to study.*
>
> Amr, online student through RUC

Regional universities have been active in taking up partnerships with RUCs. One consultation participant observed that more use of the RUCs by Group of 8 universities would expand the range of courses available in regional locations and provide RRR students with access to pathways that can currently only be pursued through relocation.

A regional tertiary provider also raised concerns about the range of courses that regionally-based students can access through RUCs, noting that the courses most frequently offered at RUCs replicate those already available at regional university campuses, such as undergraduate degrees in teaching, nursing and social work. For regional campuses serving thin markets, the loss of a single student is significant so competition for RRR students with RUCs is regarded as especially unhelpful. They called for greater effort to ensure that courses available through RUCs expand the variety of disciplines available in regional areas, rather than introduce competition between providers in the same field. It should be noted that RUCs themselves do not offer courses. While some RUCs partner with universities for provision of specific courses to local students, the core function of a RUC is to provide support to any student studying a course of their choice, through any tertiary education provider.

VET providers operating in RRR locations also face challenges associated with thin markets. During consultation, some TAFE providers reported that they communicated with providers across State borders to avoid working against each other. By sharing information on program planning, investment decisions can be made that do not create direct competition between the providers that makes student numbers unviable.

Issue for consideration 7

Regionally based tertiary providers and RUCs provide valuable support services for RRR students. Exploring how RUCs can strengthen co-operation with the tertiary providers in their region may increase the study options and modes available to RRR students.

5.3   Regulation

Consultation with TEQSA and ASQA suggests that other aspects of education delivery receives more direct focus in regulatory compliance than the provision of student support services. One peak body suggested that if there is a desire for more emphasis on student services then that needs to be included in provider standards and support by appropriate guidance and monitoring from regulators. One provider felt that greater rigour could be applied to auditing the provision of support services by viewing it as an investment in students and linking it to outcomes reporting in terms of return on investment.

Some students and providers pointed out that a higher level of support is provided to international students. At some providers, all students benefit from the more sophisticated supports that have been introduced by a National Code of Practice that applies to CRICOS providers, while at others, students feel that two tiers exist and that domestic students do not have access to equivalent services or support.

> *My course at TAFE had student support but it was mostly*
> *used by international students – hard to access for others.*
>
> Sonia, VET student

Observations from regulators on the provision of student services highlighted the wide variation in what is offered by different providers:

- Support can be little to nil, or over-the-top.
- The requirements for delivery to international students are very clear but the requirements of the Standards for RTOs for domestic students are vaguer.
- There are more vulnerable students in VET than higher education, VET students may need more support, but higher education providers are often larger and better equipped to provide support services.
- The Standards for RTOs require providers to assess learners' support needs during enrolment, some providers use this as a mechanism to screen out students who will need more support, others fail to review support needs throughout the course.

The requirement for VET providers to conduct a pre-training assessment of all learners is the most clearly articulated support requirement in the Standards for RTOs 2015. As a result, determining and addressing language, literacy and numeracy needs and learning support requirements is a major part of VET delivery in RRR areas.[76] For some of the VET providers consulted, conducting a pre-training assessment is regarded as the major demonstration of an RTO's ability to respond to individual learner needs.

In terms of regulators, it was observed that:

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[76] Commonwealth of Australia (2019) *National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy* (Napthine Review).

- There can sometimes be a disconnect between the support services that providers have available and those that are accessed by students. Some providers have 'a dizzying array' of support services with counsellors on hand, but no bookings are made.

- No provider does everything well but new ways of delivering services continue to evolve.

- Most providers are genuinely committed to supporting equity groups, the rhetoric is good but there is not as much effectiveness in how data is used to navigate, operationalise and improve services.

- There is a need to understand the scalability of expectations. Small providers won't have counsellors on staff, expectations need to be realistic.

New Zealand have introduced an interim mandatory Code of Practice for domestic tertiary students that sets out the roles and responsibilities of tertiary education organisations in promoting and supporting student wellbeing, development and educational achievement. Previously a voluntary industry code, the new legislated code was introduced, following a tragic death in student accommodation, to provide domestic tertiary students with the same protections that are afforded to international students. Six of the Code's ten outcomes focus on pastoral care for students and four outcomes focus on student accommodation.[77]

> *Understanding students means you can address their needs. If you do well with disadvantaged or vulnerable students, you do well with students generally.*
>
> Education quality agency

Issue for consideration 8

Tertiary providers are interested in guidance on how to improve support services for RRR students but they are conscious that the diversity of providers means there cannot be a one-size-fits-all approach. The provision of illustrations by regulators of what support services might be expected for different types of provider may help providers make improvements to their support services that are appropriate for their context.

5.4   Resourcing

Funding for tertiary providers is complicated and variable according to education sector, provider type and student cohort. For VET providers, funding arrangements also vary between State and Territory jurisdictions. As previously noted, HEPPP funding is only available to some higher education providers. While various programs support delivery for Indigenous students from RRR locations, most VET and independent higher education providers do not have a reliable source of funding to support RRR students.

Through consultations, providers commented on resourcing issues that affect their capacity to address RRR student support needs:

- Dual sector providers are acutely aware of discrepancies in funding to support VET and higher education students, stating that it is not possible to provide equal service for the two groups.

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[77] Ministry of Education (2021) *Pastoral Care for domestic tertiary students Q&A*, New Zealand, accessed 17 July 2021 https://www.education.govt.nz/further-education/information-for-tertiary-students/code-of-practice-pastoral-care-domestic-tertiary/pastoral-care-for-domestic-tertiary-students-q-and-a/

- VET providers reported that the funding sources they access for providing support services are inconstant and changeable as government-funded initiatives come and go. Some providers described time-consuming funding application processes to access support for regional services in thin markets and in communities on an individual basis.

- VET providers pointed out the cost difference between courses offered by universities with Commonwealth Support Place (CSP) funding compared with the same program offered at a TAFE provider of higher education ($15,000 vs $40,000). They also noted that although students can access VET Student Loans, there is an additional 20% loan fee for VET students (and for students at independent higher education providers).

- One dual sector provider observed that RRR students often have to return home due to seasonal demands or climate events, such as flooding. However, if they drop out of a subject, they are ineligible for CSP funding for the same subject the following year, which then increases the likelihood that they will drop out of the course altogether.

Issue for consideration 9

There is more targeted funding to support RRR student participation in higher education than in VET. Using a student-centred approach to establish greater parity of funding between the two sectors may help providers to deliver more consistent support services and encourage more interconnected pathway options.

5.5   Framework development

Research and consultation for the project informed the development of a good practice framework for RRR student support. As documented through sections 4.1 to 4.5, the framework includes 5 elements, good practice messages and associated areas for focus. An outline of the framework content is provided in Appendix C.

Consultation with tertiary providers revealed that many were interested in learning about support services practices used by other institutions to inspire and inform ongoing improvement of their own practice. The framework has been designed to support knowledge building and sharing between providers. Options for encouraging provider use of the framework are outlined in the next section.

6 Framework dissemination

The Good Practice Framework developed through this project is designed to encourage knowledge sharing within and between providers. The Framework includes examples of practice, educator insights and student comments to inspire reflection on current practice and discussion and sharing of ideas for ongoing improvement.

Dissemination of the Framework to target users must therefore encourage active discussion and opportunities for connection between providers. A community of practice approach is recommended as the most constructive way to bring the Framework to life.

To support its use as a resource for driving improvements in practice, the Framework will require an online 'home' and an appropriate organisation or network to take ownership of its ongoing evolution as a structure for organising guidance, examples and practical tools.

6.1 National leadership

Roll out of the Framework could be effectively by the Regional Education Commissioner. The dual benefits of this approach are that it:

- establishes a national profile for the Framework as a platform for collaboration and sharing across the tertiary sector
- provides the new Commissioner with a mechanism for engaging with all stakeholders in tertiary education that are critical to successful participation by RRR students.

Potential stages for a roll out of the Framework are outlined in the sections below.

6.2 Stage 1: Awareness raising

The Framework may be distributed to key stakeholders by the Regional Education Commissioner. The secondary audiences identified below will be critical conduits for raising awareness of the Framework. In distributing the Framework to the secondary audiences, the Regional Education Commissioner would encourage them to support its further dissemination to the primary audience by:

- Distribution through member newsletters and regular communications
- Information sessions or presentations at regular meetings or conferences
- Hosting forums or special events as a platform for discussion
- Establishing and/or leading communities of practice.

Primary audience	Secondary audience
These are the target users of the Framework – they will be encouraged to engage actively through discussion, debate and sharing of their experiences and examples of practice.	*These are the key stakeholders who will be crucial for disseminating the Framework to target users and supporting and encouraging engagement by providing a platform for dialogue and sharing.*
• Heads of faculties/departments • Student support services • Teachers, tutors, lecturers and trainers • Corporate services, including strategic planning, communications, finance and reporting	• Tertiary education peak bodies and networks • Research centres • Students and student representatives • State and Territory Government Education and Training Departments • Tertiary education regulators

During this stage the Commissioner may also use formal and informal meetings to raise awareness of the Framework with peak bodies and networks.

Communications about the Framework need to encourage potential users to engage with it constructively by emphasising its intent as a prompt for discussion and knowledge sharing, rather than imposing expectations. Messaging may include the following approaches:

Be inspired by new ideas
- It is helpful to benchmark against other providers, particularly those that are institutionally similar, to understand how well your organisation is doing

A problem shared is a problem solved
- Providers shouldn't have to work out how to best support RRR students in isolation. By sharing and contributing ideas across the sector, students will benefit.
- Yes, there is huge variety in tertiary education providers, but it can be helpful to look at what providers operating in a different context are doing and consider how those ideas can be adapted in your own context.
- A community of practice model within and between education providers is encouraged to work on ways to flesh out the details needed to implement the high-level ideas in the framework.

There is always room for improvement
- The framework is intended as a starting point, to be continuously added to and improved by practitioners involved in teaching and supporting RRR students

6.3 Stage 2: Encourage engagement

Following initial dissemination of the Framework, the Department and the Regional Education Commissioner may facilitate more active opportunities for engagement by:

- Establishing an online 'home' for the Framework capable of capturing shared information and user feedback to augment the Framework
- Conducting hosted information sessions and discussions on the platforms of key stakeholders
- Presenting at conferences

- Putting arrangements in place to establish a national community of practice.

Ideas for using the Framework that have emerged from the project research and consultation are outlined in Appendix D. These ideas identify a variety of ways that stakeholders could use the Framework to stimulate active engagement through discussion prompts and for sharing ideas and resources.

Potential opportunities for using the platforms of key stakeholders to engage with target users are identified in the table below.

Key stakeholder	Engagement opportunity
Higher Education sector	
University Australia networks • Deputy Vice Chancellors Academic committee • Student Services committee • Student support and equity committee • PVC Indigenous committee	These groups normally meet face-to-face twice each year but have met virtually more frequently over the last 18 months and out-of-session communications are maintained. They are an avenue for distribution of the Framework to university users in a variety of roles. Through the networks, views could be canvassed on how universities can further support the Framework through communities of practice or formally committing to further engagement. Universities Australia Conference 2022
Peak provider networks including the Australian Technology Network (ATN) and Innovative Research Universities (IRU)	Member network meetings and events
Independent Higher Education Australia	Member network meetings
Regional Universities Network • RUN Vice Chancellors Group	RUN Conference 2022
National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Higher Education Council	World Indigenous Peoples Conference in Education 2022 Annual General Meetings
Vocational education and training sector	

• Independent Tertiary Education Council Australia
• TAFE Directors' Australia
    ○ TAFE Higher Education Network
    ○ TAFE Quality Network
• Community Colleges Australia
• Adult Learning Australia
• Victorian TAFE Association
• VET Development Centre
• National Apprentice Employment Network
	Peak VET provider bodies have networks and committees that would be willing to include the Framework as a discussion item in meeting agendas. These groups can also distribute information to their members and host focused events for discussion and information sharing.
	Conferences and events:
	• National Apprentice Employment Network Conference, Hobart 15-17 March 2022
	• VELG Training – National VET Conference, Gold Coast 3 & 4 November 2022
	• TAFE Directors Australia annual convention 2022
	• ITECA annual conference
	• Community Colleges Australia annual conference or summit
	• Victorian TAFE Association annual conference 2022
	• VET Development Centre annual conference 2022

Research centres	

Key stakeholder	Engagement opportunity
• National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education • National Centre for Vocational Education Research • Australian Centre for Education Research	Conferences and seminars run by research centres may provide opportunities for presentations, workshops or panel discussions to share information on how providers can use and extend the Framework. • AVETRA annual conference
Support service networks	
• Equity Practitioners in Higher Education Australasia • Australian and New Zealand Support Services Association • Widening Participation Network (Qld) • Heads of Student Administration (Australia and New Zealand)	World Access to Higher Education Day, 2022 EPHEA conference 2022, Canberra, date TBD There is potential for the creation of a new network group about RRR students within the STARS (Student Transitions Achievement Retention and Success) conference format, 4-8 July 2022.
Government initiatives and programs	
Initiatives • Regional University Centres o Country University Centres • National Disability Coordination Officers **Networks** • Senior Officials Network (VET) • Equity in Higher Education Panel	Inclusion of information about the Framework on relevant DESE websites and associated communications – including links to related events and communities of practice. Inclusion on agenda of relevant network and panel meetings to encourage further information dissemination and awareness raising through the networks of group members.
Student networks	
• Isolated Children's Parent's Association • National Union of Students • Country Education Partnership	Social media and blog communications
Regulators	
• TEQSA • ASQA, VRQA, WA TAC	Inclusion of information about the Framework could be shared with providers via regulator communication channels and guidance materials, such as ASQA's *Spotlight On* series.

6.4   Stage 3: Support knowledge sharing

During this stage a national community of practice may be established to energise engagement with the Framework by a wide range of stakeholders. The aim of the community of practice would be to formally bring together representatives from key national stakeholder groups across tertiary education, prompting each of them to initiate further networking and community of practice activity within their own sphere of influence – following a pyramid model.

The national community of practice may be instigated by the Regional Education Commissioner or the Department as a high level gathering of key stakeholders. Participants would only need to meet formally – face-to-face or virtually – around three times to provide an opportunity for establishing national connections for knowledge building and sharing and to enable representatives to report back on networking activities that have taken place within their spheres of influence.

The suggested nature of the community of practice is outlined in the table below.

National Community of Practice

Purpose	The national community of practice will use the Framework to engage with tertiary education providers and encourage knowledge building and sharing around good practice in the provision of support services for RRR students.
Membership	Representation from across Australia, from peak provider bodies and a range of tertiary education environments, with a balance of VET and higher education representatives.
Activities of the National Community of Practice as a group	1. Facilitated, high-level discussion at 2-3 meetings to: 　a. Build the knowledge and professional networks of the individuals on the national community of practice by connecting them with others from across the tertiary education sector to generate and share knowledge about good practice in the provision of support services for RRR students. 　b. Identify and share ideas for encouraging use of the Framework within the spheres of influence of individual representatives. 　c. Report on networking that has occurred within the spheres of influence of individual representatives, including sharing examples of practice, tools and resources that could augment the Framework.
Activities of individual Community of Practice members	2. Raise awareness of the Framework by disseminating it as a basis to discuss good practice with their own networks and colleagues. 3. Support the work of the Regional Education Commissioner by providing advice and feedback on tertiary provider experiences and insights on good practice in the provision of support services for RRR students. 4. Connect with other members of the national Community of Practice where opportunities are identified for cooperation, knowledge sharing or joint activity. 5. Facilitate the formation of local communities of practice within each member's sphere of influence, including seeding dialogue in online forums.

6.5   Stage 4: Review

The final stage provides an opportunity to:

• reflect on how the Framework has been taken up by the target audience

• consider changes that could be made to the Framework based on use and feedback

• plan for further uptake and activity.

Members of the national community of practice would be expected to assist during this stage by informing the review process and advising on future directions for the Framework.

7   Issues for consideration

Through the research and consultation, issues have been identified that have implications for how effectively tertiary providers can implement support services for RRR students. The Department may wish to consider actions that could be taken to address the identified issues.

1. Use of support services can be normalised by reframing them through positive and inclusive terminology as services that are relevant to all students. It may be helpful for this normalising approach to also be adopted wherever possible in government-funded programs and policies so that student support is not viewed as remedial action that is only relevant to some students.

2. Students, and their advisors, would value information on scholarships and sources of financial assistance that is more easily navigable. It may be beneficial to work with tertiary education stakeholders to establish a central repository for such information that streamlines the process of searching and applying for financial assistance.

3. Despite outreach initiatives by tertiary providers, RRR people are not aware of all tertiary education options available to them. More co-ordinated approaches to community outreach and engagement that bring together VET and higher education providers and RUCs may serve to raise awareness and assist informed decision making.

4. Technological disadvantage experienced in some RRR locations is a barrier to participation in tertiary education and will be the subject of a planned investigation for the Regional Education Commissioner. Expanding the RUC model through partnerships with other regional facilities such as libraries, community centres and TAFE campuses, may enable more RRR students to engage successfully through online programs.

5. Shared information on good practice can help tertiary providers make wise investments in proven systems and solutions to build their internal capability for knowledge management. Establishing mechanisms for knowledge sharing across the tertiary sector will give providers opportunities to learn about what works.

6. Tertiary providers recognise the value of preparatory programs for ensuring that RRR students are equipped to succeed. Supporting the development of programs that can be delivered in regional areas through VET may provide students with supported pathways into tertiary education either locally or through relocation.

7. Regionally based tertiary providers and RUCs provide valuable support services for RRR students. Exploring how RUCs and tertiary providers can strengthen co-operation with each other may increase the study options and modes available to RRR students.

8. Tertiary providers are interested in guidance on how to improve support services for RRR students but they are conscious that the diversity of providers means there cannot be a one-size-fits-all approach. The provision of illustrations by regulators of what support services might be expected for different types of provider may help providers make improvements to their support services that are appropriate for their context.

9. There is more targeted funding to support RRR student participation in higher education than in VET. Using a student-centred approach to establish greater parity of funding between the two sectors may help providers to deliver more consistent support services and encourage more interconnected pathway options.

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9 Appendix A: Consultation discussion guides

The project team used discussion guides designed for each of the stakeholder groups engaged in consultation. The guides used in discussions with tertiary providers and with students are included here as examples.

Discussion guide for tertiary providers

About the research

The Napthine Review identified a need to improve the quality and range of student support services for rural, regional and remote (RRR) students to address the challenges of transition and the higher rates of attrition that these students experience.

The Department of Education, Skills and Employment is seeking to better understand the range of support services that tertiary providers currently deliver to students from RRR areas, identify where improvements could be made and prepare some informative materials to disseminate to tertiary providers on best practice methods for delivering support services to these students. The Department has commissioned Outpost Consulting to undertake the research and prepare the materials for dissemination.

As part of this, Outpost Consulting will be consulting with providers and students and their representatives.

Thank you for agreeing to meet about this topic. If you have any questions, please contact the lead researcher, Katy O'Callaghan on 0439 489 607.

Questions for discussion

1. How well does your organisation perform in terms of supporting students from RRR areas? Where are the strengths and where are the gaps?

2. Have you noticed any trends in terms of what types of support RRR students need or want to access?

3. The Napthine Review identified a number of supports which are important for tertiary RRR students, including:

   - o pastoral care
   - o specific RRR student orientation
   - o mentoring/buddy programs
   - o priority accommodation for RRR students
   - o academic support, including academic concierge
   - o regular contact with all RRR students via email, phone and SMS
   - o childcare support
   - o employment assistance, and
   - o cultural safety.

   a. Which of these services does your institution provide and for which students? Are there any services you provide that aren't on this list?

   b. What level and range of supports do you think different types of providers should be expected to offer?

   c. What are the challenges for providers in offering a comprehensive range of support services? Do you have the data you need to provide the right services to the right students?

4. Are you aware of any good practice in the provision of support services for RRR students, here or overseas? What models might enhance access to support services?

5. What guidance or support do providers need to improve their support services for RRR students?

6. What do we need to consider in preparing guidance for tertiary education providers on improving support services, in terms of content, audience, presentation and dissemination?

7. We also want to speak to students from rural, regional and remote areas, through focus groups or interviews. Are you able to help us access some students who attend your institution?

Thank you for your feedback on this important research

Discussion guide for students

About the research

There can be extra challenges for students from rural, regional and remote areas to go to university, TAFE or another education provider, particularly if it is away from their home town.

We want to hear from students about what support services you can access now, how good those services are and what else would help you. We will use your feedback to prepare a guide for education providers on how to do better in providing support services for students from rural, regional and remote areas.

Thank you for agreeing to talk us about this topic. If you have any questions, please contact the lead researcher, Katy O'Callaghan on 0439 489 607.

Questions for discussion

1. What support services are offered by your education provider for rural, regional and remote students? Do you access any of these services? Why or why not? Do you think these services could be better? How would you improve them?

2. A recent review identified a number of supports which are important for tertiary RRR students, including:

   o pastoral care
   o specific RRR student orientation
   o mentoring/buddy programs
   o priority accommodation for RRR students
   o academic support, including academic concierge
   o regular contact with all RRR students via email, phone and SMS
   o childcare support
   o employment assistance, and
   o cultural safety.

   a. Which of these services would you find useful? Are there any that are less useful? Are there other services that would be useful to you?

   b. What would be the best way for an education provider to tell you about the services? When is it best to provide communication about different services? (e.g. pre-enrolment, O-week, mid-year)

   c. What is the best way and when is the best time to deliver different services?

   d. What different support is needed at different stages of your education? (e.g. early in your course or later)

   e. How important is it to create a sense of belonging for students from rural, regional and remote areas? How could this be done?

3. When you were looking to enrol in your course, did you look at what support services were offered? What did you expect might be offered? Were you surprised about the level (or lack of) and type of support offered?

4. What issues might cause you to drop out of your course? What could your education provider do to support you to stay?

5. What are the most significant things that have made a positive difference to you that the universities or colleges could learn from?

6. Is there anything else you want to tell us about support services for rural, regional and remote students?

Thank you for your feedback on this important research

10 Appendix B: Stakeholder engagement

Providers and regulators	
Private VET providers	35
TAFEs	8
Dual sector providers	5
Public universities	18
Private universities / non-university higher education providers	6
Group Training Organisations	1
Regulators	2

Students	
VET students	10
Higher education students	55
VET and higher education students	4

Provider and student groups and networks
TAFE Higher Education Network
TAFE Quality Network
Regional Universities Network
Universities Australia
Country University Centres
Independent Higher Education Australia
Independent Tertiary Education Council of Australia
National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education
TAFE Directors Australia

Provider and student groups and networks
National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Higher Education Council
Isolated Children's Parents' Association
National Union of Students
Country Education Partnership
National Apprentice Employment Network
Equity Practitioners in Higher Education Australasia
Australian and New Zealand Student Services Association
Expert researchers x 6
Departmental teams x 4

11 Appendix C: Outline of framework content

Element 1 **CULTURE**	a. **Partnerships with students** – RRR students' knowledge, skills, experiences and cultures are valued b. **Leadership** – whole organisation is committed to and involved in student centred approaches c. **Embedding support** – services integrated into student life and teaching and learning practice d. **Responsiveness** – flexibility and receptiveness to individual needs in student services
Element 2 **RESOURCING**	a. **Financial assistance** – RRR students are assisted to access scholarships, grants and funding b. **Wellbeing support** – skilled support and counselling staff available to address needs of RRR students c. **Academic support** – skilled staff available to assist learning for RRR students d. **Accommodation assistance** – housing help provided for RRR students
Element 3 **BELONGING**	a. **Connection and identity** – is respected and proactively forged b. **Support to settle into study** – transition and first year support is provided for RRR students c. **Mentoring** –is available for RRR students d. **Indigenous perspectives and cultural competency** – are present in service delivery e. **Community outreach and engagement** – is undertaken in areas where RRR students reside
Element 4 **ENGAGEMENT**	a. **Proactive and specialised communications** – is targeted and timed for RRR students' needs b. **Student awareness of support services** – messaging raises knowledge and awareness c. **Online support services** – RRR students engage with support services using technology d. **Support for online or distance students** – relationships are built with those not attending in person
Element 5 **KNOWLEDGE**	a. **Monitoring of needs and responses** – data on RRR students' needs and engagement is collected and used b. **Prioritising resources and funding** – decisions are informed by strategy and evidence c. **Ongoing improvement** – are implemented and informed by data d. **Sharing of good practice** – learning communities are formed within and between education providers

12 Appendix D: Ideas for using the Framework

During the consultation and user testing, tertiary providers shared their ideas on resources and strategies that could support use of the Framework.

Using the Framework

The Framework is designed to prompt reflection on current practice, active discussion and knowledge sharing within and between tertiary providers. Suggested ways to use the Framework are outlined below.

As an individual

- **Evaluate** – reflect on each of the *'how do you?'* items to consider the strengths and weaknesses of your service provision to RRR students.

- **Generate ideas** – use the *'could you?'* items to think about what more you could do to support RRR students.

- **Describe solutions** – map your planned improvements to the organising structure of the Framework to help explain your approach to others within the organisation.

Within a tertiary provider

- **Reflect on student needs** – discuss whether the *'students say'* items match the perspectives or needs of your students.

- **Discuss roles and responsibilities** – consider whether the *'educators say'* items raise issues or identify solutions that are relevant to your context.

- **Plan** – use the 5 elements of the Framework to consider support services for RRR students holistically in your strategic planning.

In a provider network

- **Compare good practice** – use the stories as a starting point for sharing examples of practice that work for the context of each participant.

- **Share insights** – discuss the *'how do you?'* items to build knowledge about different ways that tertiary providers are approaching service provision.

- **Brainstorm** – look at the *'could you?'* items and share ideas about what might and might not work to provide support services for RRR students.

Peak body

- **Raise awareness** – distribute the Framework to members and invite feedback and their ideas for how it could be used.

- **Event planning** – use the structure of the Framework to define conference streams, professional development series or discussion groups.

- **Build resources**– gather member ideas and stories to expand the range of practice examples and resources supporting the Framework.

- **Support partnerships** – investigate whether there are opportunities for members to collaborate in trying out new practice ideas identified through the Framework.

- **Network** – explore good practice solutions by using the Framework as the basis for discussing alternative approaches and solutions with stakeholders from outside your sector.

Information Sources

These information sources were identified through research and consultation. They offer material that is relevant for understanding the support needs of RRR students.

NCSEHE

The [National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education](#) (NCSEHE) provides valuable information about RRR students.

Their [Regional Student Futures](#) website is relevant for:

- those thinking about university as a future option (any age or stage — mature age to school leavers)
- those who are already at university and would like to know what others have experienced
- parents, family members, friends etc. who are supporting someone who is thinking about or has already begun university
- staff who support students (in various ways) at school or university.

Mental health for mature aged RRR students

The 2020 research paper ["On the Radar: Supporting the Mental Wellbeing of Mature Aged Students in Regional and Remote Australia"](#) acknowledges that older people make up a sizable proportion of university's RRR students. It explains how universities can proactively support students' mental wellbeing.

Inquiry into mental health

The Productivity Commission's [Inquiry Report into Mental Health](#) in 2020 recommends reforms extending across workplaces, schools, universities and vocational education, the justice system, community groups and services for healthcare, psychosocial support and housing.

First in family

The [First in Family](#) website is designed to assist current and intending university students who are the first in their immediate family to go to university, as well as for their families and those who work within the higher education sector.

Quality indicators for learning and teaching (QILT)

[QILT](#) are a suite of government endorsed surveys for higher education across the student life cycle from commencement to employment. QILT provides robust, nationally consistent performance data for Australian higher education, helping drive quality improvement.

Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER)

ACER's [Assessment of university support services for regional and remote students on transition to university](#) was released in August 2018 and details the development and piloting of a Framework for a periodical assessment of support services.

Online support tools

These online support tools provide a range of functions. They are not endorsed by the Department, but were shared by participants involved in consultation and user testing as resources that can support the provision of services that are responsive to RRR student needs.

- Ask Izzy: https://askizzy.org.au/
- Proctor You: https://www.proctoru.com/
- Sonder: a https://www.sonder.io/
- Studiosity: https://www.studiosity.com/
- Symplicity Advocate: https://www.symplicity.com/higher-ed/solutions/advocate
- Talk Campus: https://www.talkcampus.io/about

Regional University Centres

Regional University Centres help students in regional and remote areas access higher education without having to leave their community. They provide student support and campus-style facilities for students who study online. The Australian Government has announced 26 Regional University Centres, located in all states and the Northern Territory.

Country University Centres are a group of affiliated Regional University Centres and provide dedicated learning and study spaces, designed for regional people by regional people. Operating in New South Wales, Queensland and Victoria, each centre is locally governed and driven by its community through an independent Board of Directors.

Networks

Tertiary education providers could consider participating in a provider network relevant to their context. Existing network members could look for opportunities to include the Framework in networking events as a mechanism for prompting discussion and knowledge sharing.

Existing networks and member organisations:

- Equity Practitioners in Higher Education Australia (EPHEA): https://www.ephea.org/
- Australian and New Zealand Student Services Association (ANZSSA): https://www.anzssa.com/
- Independent Tertiary Education Council Australia (ITECA): https://www.iteca.edu.au/
- TAFE Directors Australia (TDA): https://tda.edu.au/
- Universities Australia (UA): https://www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/
- Independent Higher Education Australia (IHEA): https://ihea.edu.au/
- Regional Universities Network (RUN): https://www.run.edu.au/
- Regional University Centres Network: https://www.rucnetwork.edu.au

13 Appendix E: Legislative requirements for student support

Legislative instrument or guidance	Applies to	Impact
Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2015	Higher education providers (for domestic and international students)	Domain 1: Student Participation and Attainment, requires the provision of: (3) Orientation to a course of study, support for transition to a course of study, early feedback on student performance, detection and support for students at risk of unsatisfactory progress and monitoring of success rates at cohort level (4) equivalence of opportunities for success irrespective of a student's background or mode of participation. TEQSA commentary states that a provider should be able to demonstrate that students are not only assisted in their transition into their course of study but also that the arrangements for transition are sensitive to the needs of particular cohorts, including: • Students enrolled in different modes of participation (e.g., online only) • Students with special needs • International students, where applicable. Domain 2: Learning Environment, includes requirements about the diversity of participation and wellbeing of staff and students. There is a focus on the creation of equivalent opportunities for academic success irrespective of students' background, and a requirement to give 'specific consideration to the recruitment, admission, participation and completion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples'. There is also a requirement to monitor participation, progress, and completion for identified student subgroups with findings used to inform admission policies and improvement of teaching, learning and support strategies for those subgroups.
TEQSA Guidance Note on Diversity and Equity	Higher education providers	The terms 'diversity' and 'equity' as used in the HESF refer broadly to the creation of equivalent opportunities for access and success in Australian higher education for historically disadvantaged or underrepresented student populations, other groups protected in Equal Opportunity and anti-discrimination legislation, and those covered by the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP). In 2021, the HEPPP was refocused through the Job-ready Graduates package to support students who are: • From regional Australia • From remote Australia • Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander • From low SES backgrounds.
Standards for Registered Training Organisations 2015	VET providers	Clause 1.7 requires RTOs to ensure that students receive training, assessment and support services that meet their individual needs. There is no defined approach as to how this support will be evaluated and provided; however, there is an assumption that the purpose of the support is to maximise the outcomes for the learner. ASQA advises RTOs to identify any support individual learners need prior to their enrolment or commencement and provide access to the required support throughout their training. Provision of support may include: • Language literacy and numeracy support • Assistive technology • Additional tutorials including online tutorial support

		• Other mechanisms, such as assistance in using technology for online delivery components. RTOs need to be able to demonstrate that for each student they identify any additional support required and make support available either directly or through arrangements with a third party.
National Code of Practice for Providers of Education and Training to Overseas Students 2018	Providers of education to international students within Australia	Standard 6: Student Support Services requires providers to: • Give overseas students information on, or access to, an orientation program about living and studying in Australia, including information about safety on campus and while living in Australia • Offer reasonable support to overseas students, irrespective of their place or mode of study, at no additional cost to the overseas student • Have a critical incident management policy • Ensure there are sufficient staff, in addition to academic staff, to support and advise overseas students who request assistance. Each of the above points are further expanded in a fact sheet that details the specific requirements that education providers must satisfy.