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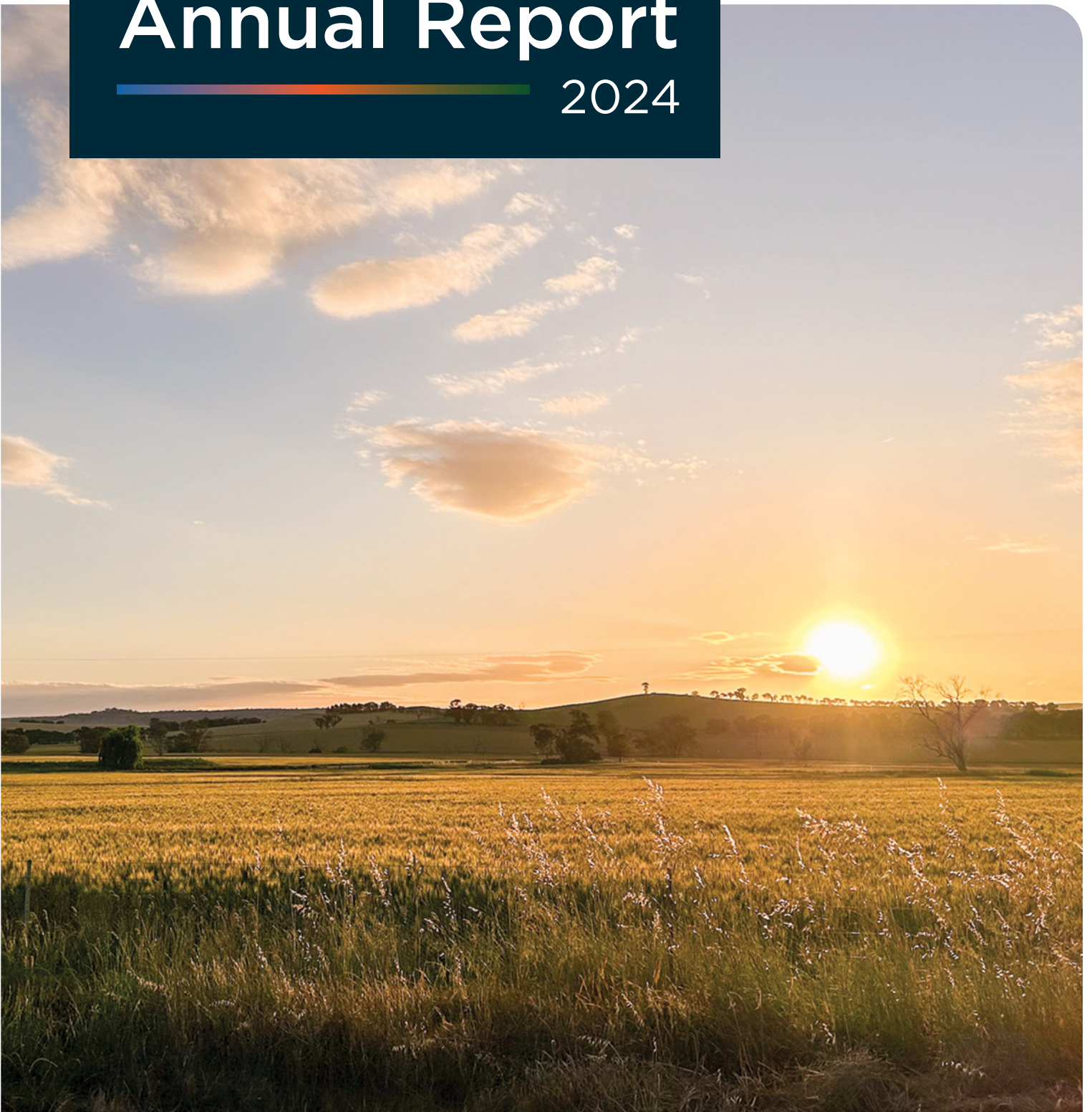


Regional  
Education  
Commissioner

# Annual Report

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## 2024



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**Cover photo taken by the Regional Education Commissioner, Cowra NSW.**

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Regional  
Education  
Commissioner

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27 November 2024

The Hon Jason Clare MP  
Minister for Education  
Member for Blaxland  
House of Representatives  
Parliament House  
CANBERRA, ACT 2600

By email: [minister.clare@education.gov.au](mailto:minister.clare@education.gov.au)

Dear Minister

In accordance with the Terms of Reference of my appointment as Australia's Regional Education Commissioner, I present my 2024 Annual Report. This report covers activities and findings from November 2023 to November 2024.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Fiona Nash".

The Hon Fiona Nash  
Regional Education Commissioner

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY



The Regional Education Commissioner and her Secretariat acknowledge the Traditional Owners and Custodians of Country throughout Australia. The Commissioner recognises and deeply respects the strength and resilience of First Nations Australians and their continuing connection to rivers, lands and seas.

The Commissioner and her Secretariat pay respect to Elders past and present and extend that respect to all First Nations people reading this report.

# REGIONAL EDUCATION COMMISSIONER'S FOREWORD

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As I finish my third year as Regional Education Commissioner, I reflect on the issues and opportunities in education that have been raised with me by people in regional, rural and remote communities right across the country.

Throughout 2024 I continued to meet with many inspirational individuals, organisations and community members from regional, rural and remote Australia; and while I am only able to showcase a small number of these in this report, I would like to thank and acknowledge all of those who work tirelessly to improve regional education outcomes and our regional communities.

Nearly a third of Australia's population lives in regional, rural and remote Australia. The efforts and expertise of regional people add strength and diversity to the social fabric and economy of the nation, and are at the heart of Australia's agriculture, resource, tourism and so many other sectors. The millions of Australians who live in these tight-knit regional, rural and remote communities deserve equitable access to a quality education and the opportunities it provides.

My role is to be a champion for regional, rural and remote people, keeping education challenges and solutions at the forefront for government and the community, and ensuring their relevance to broader policy agendas. To work with people in regional, rural and remote communities, education providers, employers and across all tiers of government and stakeholders to improve education access, participation and outcomes in the regions.

Equity is important. Regional people well understand that living, studying and working in the regions will be different than in the cities. However, what they do want is for policymakers to take their needs into account as much as they do the needs of city folk; that an individual living in a tiny rural town is seen as just as valuable as an individual living in a city of millions of people.

To do that we need to listen to people on the ground in regional, rural and remote communities. So often they already have solutions to challenges. This was evident from the First Nations education experts who participated in a roundtable I convened in September, who put forward many creative solutions to improve education outcomes.

A one size fits all approach to policymaking must be avoided. What is needed in regional, rural and remote Australia is different to what is needed in the city. Indeed, as regional people know, there are also distinct differences between individual regional, rural and remote communities.

I have been privileged to work with so many incredible people across regional Australia. I have relied heavily on their comprehensive knowledge of education issues in forming my views on the opportunities that I believe will improve outcomes for regional, rural and remote people. It is the basis on which I have formed my ongoing advice to the Minister for Education and suggested Issues for Consideration in this report.

One of the key issues for young people in the regions is the importance of nurturing aspiration and building confidence. People at times have said to me that young people in the regions don't have aspiration. Some don't. However, the majority do. What they might not have is confidence, the confidence to back themselves that they will be able to navigate the complexities of choosing to embark on a tertiary qualification and believe they can succeed in vocational education and training (VET) or university study. It is the responsibility of all of us, including policymakers and communities themselves, to support our young people in the regions to be able to follow their chosen path and realise their aspirations.

Education is the facilitator of the workforce and the broader economy – it provides people with the pathways and opportunities to pursue their career ambitions, as well as the knowledge and skills they will utilise once they get there. In this way, access to education supports workforce participation and therefore future prosperity. This is most immediate with regard to tertiary education, and the direct pathway to the workforce that tertiary qualifications provide, but schooling and early childhood education both also play vital roles. Each stage of education serves as the foundation for the next, nurturing a child's ambitions, building their confidence and increasing their chances of future success.

Support needs to start at a young age but may also be relevant for someone later in life considering a career change. The pipeline of education is so important, from the early years through school and on to tertiary study, we have to ensure that high quality educational opportunities are there for all stages of life. That barriers are removed, and people in the regions are supported to be the best they can be.

'You can't be what you can't see' is a phrase I often hear, that is particularly relevant to young people in the regions making decisions about their future career path. It's vital we ensure that they are exposed to as many different career paths as possible. So that they can make well-informed choices about how they see their future and decide on the road they want to follow.

Over time there has been a view held by some that a university pathway is better than a VET pathway. A university education is not better than a VET education. They are just different, and both lead to rewarding careers. We need to value university and VET pathways equally and encourage people to choose the option that best suits them and their aspirations.

As I travel across regional, rural and remote Australia, the need for greater collaboration between the education sectors from early childhood to tertiary education and through to industry has often struck me. My report this year contains a Proposal for Consideration, the Regional Education Collaborate and Connect program. This program would facilitate strong and sustainable connections between education providers, local industry and communities in the regions, to provide opportunities and clear pathways to support regional students and career changers to engage with tertiary education.

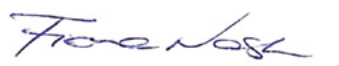
Enhancing these connections at a local level and linking students with the right education opportunities will help to homegrow a stronger regional workforce and ultimately address persistent workforce shortages across the regions.



I very much appreciate the departmental assistance I have received throughout the year, and particularly would like to thank the Department of Education Secretary Tony Cook PSM, and the Deputy Secretary of Higher Education, Research and International Group Ben Rimmer, for their ongoing support.

I sincerely want to acknowledge and thank my incredible Secretariat team, so capably led by Jacqueline Ramsay and Lucy Webster. I am so grateful for the entire team's tremendous work and support. They are a powerhouse.

Helping regional people through my role as Regional Education Commissioner is a highlight of my many years spent living and working in regional Australia, and I look forward to continuing to work with, and for, people across the regions to improve equity in education outcomes and build stronger regional, rural and remote communities.



The Hon Fiona Nash

**Regional Education Commissioner**



*Image Caption: The Regional Education Commissioner and her Secretariat team*

*Top row L-R: Max Cleversley, David Solomon, William Healy*

*Bottom row L-R: Lucy Webster, the Hon Fiona Nash, Karen Roscoe, Jacqueline Ramsay*



# ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION



## Early Childhood Education and Care

**Issue for Consideration 1** (p 13): Improve availability and flexibility of early childhood education and care (ECEC) delivery and funding models in regional, rural and remote communities. This may include:

- designing a system to provide block funding for ECEC in regional, rural and remote areas where fluctuating demand can create financial instability
- exploring solutions to support the provision of high-quality care in thin markets
- increasing the current legislative limits on educators and children in an approved Family Day Care venue, such as a council building, to allow two approved Family Day Care educators to care for no more than 14 children
- allowing for an In Home Care educator to care for children from more than one family at the same time in remote areas
- considering the delivery of online education combined with in-person care in thin markets
- expanding access to mobile childcare services and mobile playgroups.

**Issue for Consideration 2** (p 13): Extend the Assistance for Isolated Children – Distance Education (AIC-DE) allowance to 3–4 year-olds undertaking an approved pre-compulsory distance education program to reduce the financial burden for remote families who have no option other than to deliver the preschool program themselves.

## Schools

**Issue for Consideration 3** (p 21): Establish a Geographically Isolated Education Supervisors Subsidy (GIESS) to support Home Tutors educating geographically isolated students via distance education where there are no alternatives.

**Issue for Consideration 4** (p 23): Increase the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Basic Boarding Allowance to ease financial pressures for geographically isolated families caused by boarding fees.

**Issue for Consideration 5** (p 24): To ensure that all students living in remote First Nations communities where there is no secondary school can access secondary education options, consider demand-driven funding for boarding school scholarships for First Nations students from regional, rural and remote areas.

**Issue for Consideration 6** (p 42): Elevate First Nations assistant teachers to 'partner' teachers as a reflection of the importance of their cultural knowledge and expertise, and to help create a sustainable workforce in First Nations communities.

**Issue for Consideration 7** (p 38): To improve opportunities for school leavers to gain practical experience, and to assist regional, rural and remote schools to provide more support to teachers, explore the creation of an online portal where regional, rural and remote schools can advertise Teachers' Aide roles and connect with interested Year 12 students and recent school leavers.

**Issue for Consideration 8** (p 40): Establish a national body for regional, rural and remote principals and primary and secondary education leaders to provide a forum to support and develop regional, rural and remote leaders and educators.

**Issue for Consideration 9** (p 20): States and territories to consider, through the Education Ministers Meeting, the transport needs of regional, rural and remote students to ensure access to appropriate and timely school bus services.

**Issue for Consideration 10** (p 28): Consider extending the implementation timeline for the release of the Direct Measure of Income calculation from the current two months to 14 months to provide regional, rural and remote schools and families with sufficient time to respond appropriately to any impact that may result from changes in the calculation.

## Tertiary Education

**Issue for Consideration 11** (p 50): Continue to enhance and expand the Regional University Study Hubs program by exploring options including, but not limited to:

- collaborating with local communities to identify opportunities to improve education outcomes for regional, rural and remote people through support for secondary students that is tailored to the education needs of each community
- developing an appropriate framework to deliver ongoing support and governance oversight for the full network of Regional University Study Hubs to maintain the high quality of delivery
- collaborating with state and territory governments to identify further opportunities to house Regional University Study Hubs on existing TAFE sites.

**Issue for Consideration 12** (p 51): In collaboration with a remote First Nations community, design and pilot an innovative program to support First Nations students to complete their nursing education On Country.

**Issue for Consideration 13** (p 53): Expand access to, and boost attainment of, tertiary education qualifications for people from regional, rural and remote areas, by undertaking a review of the regional, rural and remote Independent Youth Allowance eligibility criteria and making necessary adjustments to ensure that regional, rural and remote students who have no choice but to relocate for tertiary study are financially supported to do so.

**Issue for Consideration 14** (p 54): Improve uptake of the Tertiary Access Payment (TAP) by:

- removing the 'no gap year' requirement
- providing students with the financial support, or at least confirmation that the payment will be made upon verification of their tertiary study enrolment after the census date, prior to relocation rather than after they commence their studies.

**Issue for Consideration 15** (p 55): Extend the eligibility for the Tertiary Access Payment (TAP) to include regional, rural and remote Australian Apprentices who must relocate from their place of residence to undertake their apprenticeship.

**Issue for Consideration 16** (p 57): Undertake an audit of regional universities' physical and digital infrastructure to determine the scale of the investment needed to ensure regional universities have the facilities to support tertiary education access and attainment, whilst also enabling the universities' social and economic contribution to their local communities.

## Cross-sector

**Issue for Consideration 17** (p 27): Create a new program in First Nations communities to establish Distance Assistance Study Hubs (DASHs) to support On Country distance education learning for First Nations students, potentially commencing through a pilot, based on the principles of the Regional University Study Hubs program.

**Issue for Consideration 18** (p 64): Acknowledging the importance of timely and relevant careers advice to students across all life stages, and its pivotal role in nurturing aspiration and building confidence and improving tertiary education attainment, improve careers advice through measures including, but not limited to:

- undertaking a national comprehensive assessment to investigate the accessibility, effectiveness and quality of current careers advice delivery, including identifying good practices
- developing a consistent national framework for careers advice across all life stages.

**Issue for Consideration 19** (p 70): Immediately address the critical veterinary workforce shortage in regional, rural and remote Australia through measures including, but not limited to:

- developing a Rural Veterinary Workforce Strategy
- providing HELP fee relief to encourage early career veterinarians to work in rural areas
- extending the eligibility of the Commonwealth Prac Payment to include veterinary science students
- supplementing university admissions processes to ensure places for students with a commitment to regional, rural and remote practice
- increasing Commonwealth funding to universities delivering veterinary degrees focussed on large animal and rural practice and/or end to end training in regional, rural and remote areas
- developing a network of rural veterinary practices and/or clinical training facilities that can provide teaching in collaboration with veterinary schools and the development of a rural-specific veterinary training pathway.

**Issue for Consideration 20** (p 71): Undertake an analysis of tertiary student graduate mobility to inform future policy design by obtaining a region-specific understanding of where regional, rural and remote students train and where they go on to work.

**Issue for Consideration 21** (p 22): Expand the School Student Broadband Initiative (SSBI) to eligible tertiary students to further increase educational access for students without affordable or reliable internet connectivity.

# PROPOSAL FOR CONSIDERATION



**Proposal for Consideration** (p 73): Establish a 'Regional Education Collaborate and Connect' program to facilitate strong and sustainable connections between regional, rural and remote education providers, industry and community to:

- nurture the aspiration and build the confidence of regional, rural and remote students
- ensure regional, rural and remote people are better informed about, and supported to pursue, post-secondary education and career pathways
- increase tertiary participation and attainment for people in regional, rural and remote communities
- facilitate a strong and sustainable 'homegrown' workforce that can address region-specific skills and workforce needs
- work towards shared community goals, and ultimately seek to deliver stronger regional, rural and remote communities.

# EQUITY IN EDUCATION IN REGIONAL, RURAL AND REMOTE AUSTRALIA



Life in regional, rural and remote Australia is, simply put, different to life in the cities. Our regional, rural and remote communities are great places to grow up, live, and grow old in – full of experiences that you will not find in a major city. However, we cannot ignore the impact of geography on the regional lifestyle. Distance, decreased population density and the associated increased costs means that access to essential services like education is more challenging than in metropolitan areas.

This is, fundamentally, an equity issue. All people, regardless of location or other determining factors, should have access to high-quality education at all stages of life. An equitable approach recognises that people in regional, rural and remote Australia face differing circumstances to those living in metropolitan areas and seeks to provide them with the educational resources and services they need to succeed.

If the market is unable to deliver essential services to these communities, government has a public good obligation to assist. This may require additional effort or funding, it may require creative and unique solutions, but to not provide these essential services is unacceptable.

## The power of education

Equity in education is vital as education holds the power to improve the lives of individuals, their families and to improve outcomes for their communities. A quality education gives people the opportunity to reach their full potential – it gives them the knowledge and skills they will use for the rest of their lives, the opportunities and pathways they will take into their future careers, and the confidence they need to get there. Education increases people's chances at future success, meaning a greater likelihood of future prosperity for themselves and also the economy more broadly. Access to education in regional, rural and remote communities is not only an equity issue in terms of the social benefits that education brings, but also the economic ones. Regional schools and universities are at the heart of their communities.

It is important to remember that education does not just mean schooling, or the qualification people get at the end of a degree. Education begins from a child's earliest years and brings compounding benefits throughout their life. A child unable to access early education prior to school, who starts off behind their peers in school, can find it difficult to ever catch up. For this reason, it is vital to apply an equity lens to the entire education lifespan from early childhood, through schooling and into vocational education and training (VET) or higher education. Ensuring that every child is supported to access and move through each stage of their education will equip them for future success.

It is often the connection points between these different stages of a child's education where intervention and support can be most important – ensuring that, for instance, a child's developmental needs identified in early education are met with wraparound support when they move into their primary schooling. The broad remit of the Regional Education Commissioner allows coordinated oversight of education for regional, rural or remote Australians across these intervention points from cradle to career.

Earlier this year, the Commissioner had a broad ranging discussion, that was recorded and subsequently published, with Professor John McKendrick, the Scottish Commissioner for Fair Access.<sup>1</sup> Whilst the geographic differences between Australia and Scotland are self-evident, the Commissioners' discussion of the opportunities that education can bring, as well as the range of complex and compounding issues for rural students in each country, demonstrates the importance of equitable access to education.



*Image Caption: Conversation between the Regional Education Commissioner and Scottish Commissioner for Fair Access hosted online by the Australian and International Journal of Rural Education on 27 February 2024*

*Top row L-R: The Hon Fiona Nash, Dr John Guenther, Dr Laurence Lasselle*

*Bottom row L-R: Carmel Hall, Professor John McKendrick, Dr Melyssa Fuqua*

<sup>1</sup> McKendrick JH, Lasselle L, Nash F, Fuqua M, Guenther J and Hall C, [\*Responding to remote, rural and regional tertiary education needs: A conversation between the Australian Regional Education Commissioner and the Scottish Commissioner for fair access\*](#), Australian and International Journal of Rural Education, volume 34, issue 2, 2024, pp 113–124.

## Championing educational equity in the regions

Last year, the Australian Government undertook a series of reviews seeking to reform each of the education sectors (see Appendix B). Across all these reviews equity was a notable and repeatedly stated theme, and the targets that have been committed to in response to them have equitable goals at their core. For example, the Australian Government has set a goal of lifting tertiary education attainment to 80 per cent of working age people by 2050.<sup>2</sup> Such targets are commendable but will require real action to achieve. These targets will not be met without increasing the participation of, and providing support for, currently underrepresented student cohorts. They will therefore be extremely difficult to achieve without a focus on the regions.

There are significant education-related roadblocks that people living in regional, rural and remote communities face compared to people in metropolitan areas. Many of these roadblocks present themselves in early childhood education and often persist through to tertiary education.

The Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), Schools and Tertiary chapters of this report will explore these in more detail, but consistent roadblocks across multiple sectors include:

- The increased cost of delivering all levels of education in regional, rural and remote areas.
- The tyranny of distance, and the necessity to relocate for educational opportunities, including the associated costs of travel and/or relocation.
- The limited availability of secondary school subjects and/or tertiary courses in regional, rural and remote areas.
- Variable support for, or exposure to, the full range of future career opportunities.
- Chronic educator workforce shortages in regional, rural and remote areas.

Each of these roadblocks involves many complex issues about which the Commissioner has heard from individuals, communities, organisations, and all levels of government (a full list of the stakeholders engaged with in 2024 can be found in Appendix A).

In addition to this ongoing engagement with regional, rural and remote stakeholders throughout the year, in September the Commissioner convened a roundtable of First Nations experts in regional, rural and remote education. Facilitated by Distinguished Professor Larissa Behrendt, this roundtable provided the Commissioner with an invaluable opportunity to engage with First Nations leaders in the regional, rural and remote education sector. The Commissioner will continue to work with this group in 2025, exploring priorities for improving education outcomes for First Nations people. While the roundtable to date has focussed on issues in the school and tertiary sectors, the Commissioner looks forward to expanding the conversation further in 2025 to consider issues of regional, rural and remote early childhood education and care (ECEC) access and participation for First Nations children and communities.

*'The community is not an afterthought, it is at the heart of everything we do.'*

Daniel Fusi – Senior Leader, Community Engagement, Menindee Central School

Thanks to the creativity and dedicated commitment of regional Australians to genuinely make things better in their own communities, the Commissioner has seen and heard many examples of innovative ideas and locally tailored solutions taking place in regional, rural and remote areas. These are showcased throughout the report.

<sup>2</sup> Australian Government, [Australian Universities Accord – Budget Summary](#), 15 May 2024, p 5.



## Impact and influence

As a champion for people in regional, rural and remote communities, the Commissioner has provided input to several reviews across the education and skills sectors, ensuring decision-makers are aware of the implications that their policies may have on people in these communities.

The recently released final reports of the Productivity Commission ECEC inquiry, and the Jobs and Skills Australia ECEC Workforce Capacity Study, demonstrate the Commissioner's close engagement with the ongoing ECEC reform. Issues raised by the Commissioner in submissions and roundtables about the challenges of ECEC provision in regional, rural and remote Australia are reflected in the final report recommendations.

The Commissioner has worked closely with the Jobs and Skills Australia Commissioner, Professor Barney Glover AO, on skills training needs to strengthen the regional workforce, including participating in roundtables and making submissions to the Jobs and Skills Australia ECEC Workforce Capacity Study and the Jobs and Skills Australia Food Supply Chain Capacity Study.

The Commissioner has also engaged closely on issues where regional education and health issues intersect, meeting regularly with the National Rural Health Commissioner and as a member of the Murray Darling Medical School Network Evaluation Expert Reference Group.

Following her work as a Panel Member on the Australian Universities Accord, the Commissioner has continued to support the implementation of the Government's response to the Accord final report recommendations. The Commissioner also continues to work with the department on programs aimed at supporting the regions, including as an Assessment Panel member for Rounds 3, 4 and 5 of the Regional University Study Hubs expansion and her involvement with the Commonwealth Regional Education Scholarship program.



*Image Caption: Department of Education Senior Executive Staff Connect Presentation 29 May 2024*

*L-R: The Hon Fiona Nash, Regional Education Commissioner and Tony Cook PSM, Secretary of the Department of Education*

# EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE



Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) is the beginning of a child's education and has important flow-on effects on the rest of a child's life. The experiences and opportunities in these early years lay the foundations for a child's future success in education and life beyond. Alongside these life-changing benefits for regional, rural and remote children, ECEC also provides a broader community benefit by allowing parents to join or return to the workforce.

The Productivity Commission ECEC inquiry found that around 328,000 parents identify ECEC-related issues as the main barrier they face to greater labour force participation. The Productivity Commission also found removing these barriers, through the provision of more affordable, available childcare, could see an increase in labour supply of up to 46,000 full-time equivalent workers among parents who want a job or to work more hours.<sup>3</sup> Accessing additional workers is especially crucial for regional, rural and remote communities which often face shortages of workers in a number of fields.

There are many areas across regional, rural and remote Australia where the number of children in the community for whom care is sought is low. These areas are often referred to as 'thin markets' and running a viable ECEC service in these areas can be difficult. Shortages of available skilled ECEC workers also continue to act as a barrier to ECEC delivery in regional, rural and remote areas. Solving these challenges is important to ensure that every child has adequate access to ECEC.

## Access to early childhood education and care in the regions

All children deserve access to ECEC. Recently, Australia has made some encouraging progress in making ECEC more available. The Mitchell Institute found that the percentage of Australians living in a 'childcare desert', communities where there are more than three children seeking ECEC for every available place, has reduced to 24 per cent in 2024 from 36 per cent in 2020, with 80,000 more places created in those years.<sup>4</sup>

However, in regional, rural and remote Australia the number of children requiring a place still greatly exceeds the places available. The Productivity Commission ECEC inquiry, which used a different methodology to determine ECEC availability to the Mitchell Institute<sup>5</sup>, shows that the proportion of children living in areas with fewer than one ECEC place per three children is substantially higher in regional and remote areas than in Major Cities.<sup>6</sup>

3 Productivity Commission, [A path to universal early childhood education and care](#), Inquiry report no. 106, Vol. 1, 2024, p 73 (Findings 4.3 and 4.4).

4 Victoria University Mitchell Institute, [Key findings – Australia](#), International childcare report: Mapping the deserts, 2024, p 1.

5 Productivity Commission, [A path to universal early childhood education and care: Supporting papers](#), Inquiry report no. 106, Vol. 2, 2024, p 299 (Box 5.3).

6 Productivity Commission, [A path to universal early childhood education and care: Supporting papers](#), p 305 (Table 5.2).

The Productivity Commission ECEC inquiry final report states:

*'To create a universal system, every child aged 0–5 years whose family decides to enrol should be able to access high-quality ECEC for at least 30 hours or three days a week, for 48 weeks of the year.'*<sup>7</sup>

Productivity Commission, *A path to universal early childhood education and care Inquiry report – Volume 1*

If this benchmark is to be met in regional, rural and remote areas, flexible solutions to support the provision of high-quality care in thin markets must be considered. What works for these communities differs from what works in cities, and regional, rural and remote communities differ from one another. 'One size fits all' responses will not work across all areas, and communities' unique circumstances need consideration when delivering ECEC. All levels of government need to work together to ensure that the right models for each individual community are funded to successfully deliver care to all regional, rural and remote children.

## CASE STUDY: The Parenthood

The Parenthood is an independent, not-for-profit advocacy organisation launched in 2013. It works to ensure the voices of parents and carers are represented in the national discourse.

Over the past year, the Parenthood has published two reports that highlight the challenges families in regional, rural and remote Australia face when seeking access to ECEC, and the impacts this inaccessibility has on their communities.

In November 2023, the Parenthood published 'Choiceless' – The plight of parents in accessing regional, rural and remote early learning and care.<sup>8</sup> The report provides a collection of over 160 firsthand accounts of the challenges faced by families and communities who lack access to ECEC. The report is filled with stories of families and communities' efforts to do what they can to provide their children with the benefits of ECEC, but also spotlights the critical ECEC shortages across many parts of regional, rural and remote Australia, and highlights the human impacts these shortages have. The report makes clear that much more needs to be done to ensure all children across Australia have access to ECEC.

In September 2024, the Parenthood published 'Impactful – The negative impacts of inaccessible early learning on regional, rural and remote communities.' This report highlights that without access to ECEC services, regional, rural and remote communities face increased cost of living challenges and reduced liveability in their communities. The report also finds that the current 'one size fits all' approach to ECEC policy and funding does not account for the unique challenges and diverse needs of different regional, rural and remote communities.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Productivity Commission, *A path to universal early childhood education and care*, p 27.

<sup>8</sup> The Parenthood, *'Choiceless: The plight of parents in accessing regional, rural and remote early learning and care'*, November 2023.

<sup>9</sup> The Parenthood, *'Impactful – The negative impacts of inaccessible early learning on regional, rural and remote communities'*, September 2024, pp 4-5.

In discussions with the Commissioner, communities have raised the need for funding models that are not tied to the number of children. For remote communities especially, this number can fluctuate substantially, and there may be times where the number of children seeking care is not enough to make operating a service financially viable. Nonetheless, these children should still be able to access ECEC. A baseline level of funding to allow a service to stay open even when child numbers are low would help to ensure that all children are able to access care, even when they live in a thin market.

*'Access to early childhood education and care should not depend on your postcode, or how much you earn. Governments must step up to take the pressure off of regional, rural and remote parents and make sure their families are no longer disadvantaged.'*<sup>10</sup>

Maddy Butler, Campaign Director, The Parenthood

Where families are unable to access an ECEC service, or the service is located a considerable distance from their home, mobile ECEC services present an alternative for children to attend care where they live. This allows families to access care closer to home on some days, providing flexibility in delivery for thin markets. Mobile ECEC services should be provided with more sustained, long-term funding to ensure their viability. However, while mobile ECEC services are an important option, they should not be a replacement for other services, such as centre-based day care venues, being made available in regional, rural and remote communities.

With these points in mind, it is welcome that the Productivity Commission ECEC inquiry has recommended an 'ECEC Development Fund' to support universal access in persistently thin markets.<sup>11</sup> The Productivity Commission noted that this fund should be open to various forms of care, including family day care and mobile care, depending on the needs of the community.<sup>12</sup> This approach would provide much needed stability of funding and flexibility to allow ECEC providers to meet the varying needs of their communities.

In January 2024, the Commissioner made a submission to the Productivity Commission ECEC inquiry in response to the draft report. The Commissioner encouraged the Productivity Commission to examine the practicality of several other interventions aimed at making it easier for ECEC providers to operate in thin markets.

These included changes proposed by the Isolated Children's Parents' Association (ICPA) to allow up to two Family Day Care educators to care for up to 14 children in an approved Family Day Care venue.<sup>13</sup> This would benefit small communities where demand is too low to deliver centre-based day care venues. This proposal became one of the recommendations in the Productivity Commission ECEC inquiry final report.<sup>14</sup>

10 The Parenthood, [Childcare shortage crushes families in the regions](#), theparenthood.org.au, accessed 22 October 2024.

11 Productivity Commission, A path to universal early childhood education and care, p 76 (Recommendation 5.2).

12 Productivity Commission, A path to universal early childhood education and care, p 76 (Recommendation 5.2).

13 Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia (ICPA), [2023 Federal Conference Early Childhood Education and Care Portfolio Motions](#), Motion A25, pp 4-5.

14 Productivity Commission, A path to universal early childhood education and care, p 77 (Recommendation 5.3).

The Commissioner's submission also proposed allowing In Home Care educators to care for children from more than one family in remote locations as a way to provide care to multiple families living in remote locations such as pastoral stations, aligned with ICPA's proposal.<sup>15</sup> These interventions could allow more ECEC options in remote areas where there is an absence or limited supply of centre-based day care.

The submission also encouraged the Productivity Commission to explore the delivery of online education combined with in-person care. By allowing the education component to be delivered remotely by a qualified educator, children would still be able to access the benefits of ECEC even if there is a limited ECEC workforce in the area. Several current programs providing distance ECEC for remote children and families, including Katherine School of the Air's 'KSA Cubs', Brisbane School of Distance Education's 'eKindy' and the Remote and Isolated Children's Exercise in South Australia, demonstrate how online delivery combined with in-person supports like resource packs, learning guides and occasional face-to-face playgroups can provide a quality early education for isolated children.

*'Universal does not mean uniform'<sup>16</sup> – a diversity of service models are needed, responsive to the diversity of communities and contexts.'*

Samantha Page, CEO, Early Childhood Australia

### CASE STUDY: eKindy

Facilitated by the Brisbane School of Distance Education, eKindy offers in home kindergarten for children in the year before primary school who live in rural and remote areas, are travelling or are medically unable to attend in-person preschool. eKindy is available at no cost to eligible families and provides children with 15 hours a week of ECEC during the 40 weeks of school term. Learning guides and resource packs are provided to parents, and the program offers a flexible schedule for families, with distance educators supporting children through a variety of avenues including phone, email, web video sessions and in-person playdays where possible. In-person 'eKindy pods' at local schools are also facilitated by BUSHkids, allowing participating children to come together for play days with their peers throughout the program.<sup>17</sup>

Examples like eKindy demonstrate that in regional, rural and remote Australia there is no 'one size fits all' solution when it comes to ECEC access. A range of flexible approaches to ECEC delivery must be encouraged, and adequately funded, to ensure that every child and their family in the regions can access the benefits of high-quality ECEC.

<sup>15</sup> ICPA, *2023 Federal Conference ECEC Portfolio Motions*, Motion A22, pp 2–3.

<sup>16</sup> Government of South Australia, *Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care – Report*, August 2023, p 3.

<sup>17</sup> Brisbane School of Distance Education, *eKindy*, [brisbanesde.eq.edu.au](https://brisbanesde.eq.edu.au), accessed 1 November 2024.

### Issue for Consideration 1

Improve availability and flexibility of early childhood education and care (ECEC) delivery and funding models in regional, rural and remote communities. This may include:

- designing a system to provide block funding for ECEC in regional and remote areas where fluctuating demand can create financial instability
- exploring solutions to support the provision of high-quality care in thin markets
- increasing the current legislative limits on educators and children in an approved Family Day Care venue, such as a council building, to allow two approved Family Day Care educators to care for no more than 14 children
- allowing for an In Home Care educator to care for children from more than one family at the same time in remote areas
- considering the delivery of online education combined with in-person care in thin markets
- expanding access to mobile childcare services and mobile playgroups.

## Assistance for Isolated Children – Distance Education (AIC-DE) Allowance

Under the Preschool Reform Agreement, Australian children are entitled to at least 15 hours of quality programmed preschool education in the year before they start school.<sup>18</sup> However, barriers such as the distance from remote locations to physical preschool programs prevent some children from accessing this entitlement unless families provide the learning resources themselves and bear the cost of this.

The AIC-DE allowance, delivered through Services Australia, currently provides financial assistance towards incidental costs incurred by geographically isolated families whose children are undertaking an approved course via distance education; however, the allowances are only available for the primary, secondary or tertiary levels, not for pre-compulsory education programs.

Making the AIC-DE allowance available to geographically isolated families providing preschool education to their children would appropriately value the role families play in delivering ECEC in the regions by reducing the financial burden on these families, who often have no option other than to deliver the preschool program themselves.<sup>19</sup>

### Issue for Consideration 2

Extend the Assistance for Isolated Children – Distance Education (AIC-DE) allowance to 3–4 year-olds undertaking an approved pre-compulsory distance education program to reduce the financial burden for remote families who have no option other than to deliver the preschool program themselves.

18 Australian Government and States, [Preschool Reform Agreement, Federation Funding Agreement – Education and Skills](#), 2021, p 13.

19 ICPA, *2023 Federal Conference ECEC Portfolio Motions*, Motion A21, pp 1–2.

The Commissioner's submission to the Productivity Commission ECEC inquiry draft report also encouraged the Productivity Commission to examine extending the AIC-DE allowance to 3–4-year-olds undertaking an approved pre-compulsory distance education program. The Commissioner welcomes the Productivity Commission's recommendation to trial expanding the AIC-DE allowance to include preschool education but urges the government, as it considers the Productivity Commission ECEC inquiry's final report, to consider implementing the allowance fully rather than through a trial. Full implementation of the allowance recognises the important role that parents play in supporting their children's education in their early years.

## Supporting all children to succeed

Ensuring all children are provided with the supports they need to engage with ECEC is critical to their long-term wellbeing. ECEC also has an important role to play in the delivery of additional services that children need. Children living in regional, rural and remote communities with additional needs, such as children living with disability or developmental delays, must have access to ECEC services that support them to thrive in their early years and as they transition into school.

The first years of a child's life are a critical, but short, time to make the biggest impact on a child's development.<sup>20</sup> Ensuring that children have the right support in their early years can have a significant effect on their future.<sup>21</sup> Services must be delivered equitably across the country to support children with possible developmental delays, including the provision of timely supports to address concerns early.<sup>22</sup>

Providing children with the right support in their early years can have a major positive effect on their future. However, the Productivity Commission ECEC inquiry found that children who would benefit most from ECEC are less likely to attend.<sup>23</sup> This includes both children from regional and remote areas and children with disability.<sup>24</sup> Australian Early Development Census data also shows that children in regional and remote Australia are more likely to be developmentally vulnerable than those in major cities.<sup>25</sup>

Ensuring that these children are provided with the supports they need, and are able to access all the benefits that ECEC can bring, is in many cases a matter of resourcing. The Productivity Commission ECEC inquiry found that while many services are adept at supporting children with disability or developmental delay, in some instances they exclude children as they are unable to meet their needs.<sup>26</sup> Services must be resourced to ensure they can provide education and care to any family that wishes to enrol their children.

20 Department of Social Services, [The Early Years Strategy 2024–2034](#), 2024, p 5.

21 Australian Early Development Census (AEDC), [Australian Early Development Census National Report](#), 2021, p 9.

22 Department of Social Services, [The Early Years Strategy 2024–2034](#), p 13.

23 Productivity Commission, *A path to universal early childhood education and care*, p 58 (Finding 2.1).

24 Productivity Commission, *A path to universal early childhood education and care: Supporting papers*, p 50.

25 AEDC, *Australian Early Development Census National Report*, p 41.

26 Productivity Commission, *A path to universal early childhood education and care: Supporting papers*, p 59.



## Integrated services

In many regional, rural and remote communities the availability of child development services is often limited – making supports for developmentally vulnerable children, or those with disability, expensive and difficult to access. One potential avenue to address this is the development of new or existing ECEC services to act as ‘integrated services’. Integrated services provide children and families with access to multiple support services, such as education, care and allied health, in a single location. These integrated services can operate through a number of different models, from co-located services that operate independently, to fully integrated services that offer all services under a single entity.<sup>27</sup>

Increased access to integrated services would be particularly beneficial in regional, rural and remote communities. Allowing child development services, among others, to be more easily available through existing ECEC services would expand their accessibility in communities where are currently more limited. Accessing these services through a single location would also reduce the need for families to engage with a greater number of services which may be located far apart, attracting additional costs and necessitating greater travel time.

Where fully integrated services may not be required, or possible, in a regional, rural and remote community, ECEC services should be resourced to effectively work with other services to deliver additional forms of care that may be required. This approach would look different in any given community and should be responsive to local contexts and areas of need.

### CASE STUDY: Contact Inc.

Contact Inc. works to help children and families in regional, rural and remote contexts by working across communities to find solutions to local service gaps, supports and information.

Contact Inc. has both partnered with and provided Mobile Children’s Services that offer tailored support programs for isolated families and communities, including kindergarten, childcare, play group and family health and wellbeing programs.

Contact Inc. also works with the Royal Flying Doctor Service South Eastern Section to deliver RuralConnect, an initiative aimed at addressing health and wellbeing needs for isolated children, families and communities. RuralConnect ‘Family Fun Days’ connect communities with early childhood activities and health professionals, promote support services available, and create opportunities for isolated communities to connect and build a sense of community.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Productivity Commission, *A path to universal early childhood education and care: Supporting Papers*, p 464.

<sup>28</sup> Contact Inc, [RuralCONNECT](https://www.contactinc.org), contactinc.org, accessed 1 November 2024.

## Educator Workforce in the Regions

A strong regional, rural and remote ECEC sector needs to attract and retain a qualified workforce. There will need to be a significant increase in the availability of ECEC services in the regions to ensure all families can access high-quality care. This process will require attracting, training and retaining substantial numbers of early childhood educators in regional, rural and remote Australia.

*'Quality early childhood education and care starts with quality early childhood educators and teachers.'*

*'The recruitment and retention of staff in regional, rural and remote areas starts with better pay and conditions. However, workforce initiatives are needed, including wage subsidies, professional development, relocation and locality incentives, and professional support and training. Building up the local workforce is also key.'*<sup>29</sup>

Access for Every Child Coalition

In September 2024, Jobs and Skills Australia released its ECEC Workforce Capacity Study. This study found that a key barrier to ECEC workforce entry and retention is that ECEC workplaces may be located considerable distances from workers' homes, and recommended benefits such as covering transport costs and subsidising ECEC costs for ECEC workers' own children.<sup>30</sup>

In December 2023 the Commissioner made a submission to the Jobs and Skills Australia ECEC Workforce Capacity Study. The submission discussed how technology can provide opportunities to remove barriers caused by location and provide access to quality ECEC for children who may be unable to access it otherwise. In the context of ongoing ECEC workforce shortages exploring flexible solutions, such as the online delivery of early childhood education combined with in-person care, could provide support to carers working in remote locations whilst also allowing educators to engage with a greater number of families than they would if they had to physically attend each location. A 'hybrid model' of In Home Care and distance education could involve connecting otherwise isolated ECEC workers and providing ongoing professional support, resource sharing and group lesson planning.

The Commissioner also recommended that the Jobs and Skills Australia Workforce Capacity Study investigate:

- Promoting and supporting transitions into ECEC careers in the regions to secondary students and prospective mid-career entrants.
- Offering ECEC educators who are studying to become teachers accelerated pathways and greater flexibility to complete their qualifications while working.

These kinds of flexible approaches, if implemented successfully, would support and reinforce the regional, rural and remote ECEC workforce whilst also ensuring that children in the regions are able to access consistent and quality early childhood education.

29 Access for Every Child Coalition, [Joint Statement for Government Action: Improve Regional, Rural & Remote Early Learning and Care](#), The Parenthood, 2024, p 3.

30 Jobs and Skills Australia, [The Future of the Early Childhood Education Profession: Early Childhood Education and Care Workforce Capacity Study](#), 2024, p 160.

## Training for ECEC educators

Retention is a significant issue in the regional, rural and remote ECEC workforce. For all ECEC workers matters such as pay, job security and flexibility, and career progression opportunities may influence a decision to remain in the profession.<sup>31</sup> These factors combine with additional challenges in regional, rural and remote Australia that can lead to difficulties for ECEC providers to attract and retain a suitably skilled and qualified workforce.

Where there are no locally qualified workers, it can be exceedingly difficult to attract workers to a region. Practicalities such as housing, employment for spouses and partners, and schooling options all weigh into a person's willingness to move to a regional, rural or remote location and can be difficult to resolve.

Regional, rural and remote communities need to be able to draw on their existing population by providing people with the education and training they need to work as ECEC educators. However, many stakeholders have reflected on the unfortunate consequences that a lack of local training options can have. Not only are there barriers to relocating to obtain required training, but when people do relocate away from the regions to study they do not always return to the regions and bring their newly acquired skills back with them.

Stakeholders have also discussed how the minimum education requirements for ECEC educators can heighten workforce pressures and affect access to ECEC for families. For example, in centre-based services, 50 per cent of educators in a service must have, or be actively working towards, an approved diploma level education and care qualification.<sup>32</sup> For smaller providers, these requirements, combined with the entry requirements to be admitted into diploma level study (discussed below), can prevent experienced long-term ECEC educators from participating in the workforce.

The Commissioner's submission in response to the Productivity Commission ECEC inquiry draft report encouraged an investigation of providing students undertaking an ECEC qualification with paid placements where they temporarily relocate to a regional, rural or remote area to complete a placement. The new Practicum Exchange Living Allowance will become available in early 2025 and provide a payment to eligible ECEC educators, who have used the Practicum Exchange network website to arrange their practicum and are undertaking an exchange in a regional, rural or remote area other than their home location.<sup>33</sup> This will provide much needed support for ECEC educators training in regional, rural and remote communities.

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31 Jobs and Skills Australia, *Early Childhood Education and Care Workforce Capacity Study*, p 155–160.

32 Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority (ACECQA), [Qualifications for centre-based services with children preschool age or under](#), accessed 13 September 2024.

33 Department of Education, [Practicum exchange network](#), education.gov.au, accessed 13 November 2024.

## Recognition of Prior Learning

Stakeholders have also raised challenges with the process of gaining Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) for educators with a Certificate III in ECEC who wish to upgrade their qualification to a Diploma in ECEC, especially when their Certificate III is not recent. These educators are required to provide extensive documentation and evidence to obtain RPL. The Commissioner has heard that this leads some educators to instead redo their Certificate III, increasing the cost and time taken to attain the Diploma, or not pursue the Diploma at all.

The Commissioner's submission to the Jobs and Skills Australia ECEC Workforce Capacity Study recommended investigating improvements to the RPL process to reduce barriers to upgrading qualifications to a Diploma in ECEC for educators who hold a superseded Certificate III in ECEC (one obtained before 1 July 2013).

The Workforce Capacity Study final report notes that there is little recognition of prior learning and on-the-job experience across ECEC training pathways, which is disincentivising upskilling and contributing to the shortage of experienced ECEC educators with Diploma qualifications.<sup>34</sup> This is likely to result in increased pressure on the regional, rural and remote educators who do hold Diplomas in order to meet regulatory standards.<sup>35</sup>

The Commissioner welcomes the Workforce Capacity Study recommendation that regulators consider changes that would incentivise better RPL, including finding ways to recognise an educator's practical experience when they wish to pursue ECEC related higher education and VET level qualifications.

The Commissioner also welcomes the Productivity Commission ECEC inquiry report recommendation to re-examine entry requirements for Diploma courses for people who already hold a Certificate III qualification.<sup>36</sup>

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34 Jobs and Skills Australia, *Early Childhood Education and Care Workforce Capacity Study*, pp 148–149.

35 Jobs and Skills Australia, *Early Childhood Education and Care Workforce Capacity Study*, p 148.

36 Productivity Commission, *A path to universal early childhood education and care*, p 66 (Recommendation 3.3).

# SCHOOL EDUCATION

In regional, rural and remote Australia, schools are embedded in their local communities, creating a point of connection between students, parents, and the wider community. As more families move to the regions to experience the benefits of living in closeknit regional communities, we need to ensure that regional, rural and remote schools are able to deliver the best outcomes for their students. The future Australian workforce will rely more heavily on skilled workers and our regional, rural and remote schools must be able to help students navigate the pathways to work in existing and new areas.

There are challenges that still need to be addressed to ensure students can access these opportunities. Students in regional, rural and remote areas have consistently lower outcomes than their city counterparts. They attend school less, leave school earlier and require more learning support.<sup>37</sup> Whilst these outcomes are improving for some regional, rural and remote students, there remains a persistent gap to their metropolitan peers. This gap in educational outcomes worsens as remoteness increases and compounds if students are also from another equity cohort, such as First Nations.<sup>38</sup> Regional, rural and remote communities generally face greater issues accessing secondary education than primary education. The challenges of accessing education and staffing schools are more pronounced in regional, rural and remote areas for secondary schools than primary schools.<sup>39</sup>

In this chapter, innovative examples of good practice show how regional, rural and remote communities are leading the implementation of solutions to the challenges they face; from accessing education, achieving comparable education outcomes to metropolitan students, and attracting and retaining teachers in the regions.

## Accessing education in the regions

The further you get away from the city, the less choice families have for their children's education. Whilst it may not be feasible for primary and secondary schools to be located in all remote locations, all levels of government need to work together to ensure that children in these communities have options available to them so they can realise their aspirations and make the most of the benefits and opportunities that education provides. This includes providing opportunities for First Nations students in regional, rural and remote communities to be able to remain On Country to undertake their schooling. It is unacceptable that a child growing up in remote Australia be unable to succeed and realise their full potential based on an inability to access education.

37 Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), [Student Attendance](#), Student Attendance rate by school sector and state/territory and geolocation for Years 1–10 [data set] 2023, [acara.edu.au](#), accessed 23 October 2024; ACARA, [Year 12 certification rates](#), Year 12 certification rates by sex and state/territory and geolocation [data set], 2022, accessed 23 October 2024; Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO), [Learning outcomes of students with early low NAPLAN performance](#), 2023, p 12.

38 ACARA, [Student Attendance](#), Student Attendance rate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students by school sector and state/territory and geolocation for Years 1–10 [data set], [acara.edu.au](#), 2023, accessed 23 October 2024; ACARA, [Year 12 certification rates](#), Year 12 certification rates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students by sex and state/territory and geolocation [data set], [acara.edu.au](#), 2022, accessed 23 October 2024; AERO, [Learning outcomes of students with early low NAPLAN performance](#), p 12.

39 Bourne K, Nash A and Houghton K, [Pillars of communities: Service delivery professionals in small Australian towns 1981-2011](#), The Regional Australia Institute, 2017, p 20.

## Access to transport

Many students living in regional, rural and remote areas live long distances from their schools and rely on bus services to get to and from school each day. Regional school buses play a vital role in connecting students in regional, rural and remote communities to their education. Across Australia, there are thousands of dedicated bus routes which support students' school attendance. In New South Wales alone, school students make up 90 per cent of passengers on buses in the regions.<sup>40</sup>

Most Australian jurisdictions have identified challenges with their bus systems. Western Australia, Victoria, New South Wales and South Australia have conducted reviews into regional, rural and remote school bus services, and investigated issues facing regional school buses.<sup>41</sup> In May 2023, the New South Wales Government established the Bus Industry Taskforce which highlighted that bus services in regional areas were not meeting the needs of students. Feedback from the sector found that students were arriving up to 30 minutes late or needing to finish school 30 minutes early in order to make the bus home.<sup>42</sup> The Taskforce also found that many students reported spending over 10 hours a week or more on a bus and recommended a need to establish more bus routes.<sup>43</sup>

Aligning bus timetabling and bus routes to fit community needs would support school attendance in the regions and help students to access the full range of educational opportunities. If school buses are picking up students once school has already started or has yet to finish, these students are missing out on vital class time.

### Issue for Consideration 9

States and territories to consider, through the Education Ministers Meeting, the transport needs of regional, rural and remote students to ensure access to appropriate and timely school bus services.

## Accessing education from home

For students in remote locations where there is no access to a school, or the local school does not meet their needs, families need to make difficult decisions with significant impact on their financial position and living arrangements. They may move away from their community to be closer to schools, undertake distance education or make the expensive decision to send their children to boarding school.

Distance education is an important way for geographically isolated students to undertake study at home in their communities. However, parents and carers are required to sacrifice their time and income to supervise their child's learning in the home or hire a tutor in order for their child to access distance education.

40 NSW Bus Industry Taskforce, [The Forgotten Mode: a call to action for buses](#), NSW Government, May 2024, p 131.

41 Public Accounts Committee, [Bus Fair: The report of the inquiry into the Student Transport Assistance Policy framework](#), Western Australia Legislative Assembly, August 2022; SA Department of Treasury and Finance, [Review of Regional School Bus Services](#), October 2020; Legislative Council Economy and Infrastructure Committee, [Inquiry into the use of school buses in rural and regional Victoria](#), Parliament of Victoria, November 2021.

42 The Association of Independent Schools of NSW, [NSW Government must fix decades of neglect on regional buses](#) (media release), 22 February 2024.

43 NSW Bus Industry Taskforce, [The Forgotten Mode](#), p 37.

*'It is compulsory that distance education children be supervised by an adult - the distance education tutor, who must be available and able to provide the practical, day-to-day supervision and support required for the effective delivery of a distance education program. The cost of providing this supervision is a major burden to the family, whether they are paying someone or by the loss of income incurred when a parent (usually the mother) gives up paid employment to provide this supervision.'*<sup>44</sup>

**Isolated Children's Parents' Association, Katherine Branch (NT)**

The Commissioner's 2022 and 2023 Annual Reports identified these high financial costs associated with accessing education in remote areas. In these reports and several submissions to state and federal reviews, the Commissioner encouraged the Government to consider implementing a Distance Education Teaching Allowance (DETA) to help ease this additional financial burden on families of geographically isolated students.

Following the Isolated Children's Parents' Association (ICPA) Federal Conference held in July 2024, the ICPA has reframed the DETA as a Geographically Isolated Education Supervisors Subsidy (GIESS).<sup>45</sup> This subsidy would aim to support home tutors teaching geographically isolated students by easing the financial burden on those families who have no options other than to teach their children at home.

### **Issue for Consideration 3**

Establish a Geographically Isolated Education Supervisors Subsidy (GIESS) to support Home Tutors educating geographically isolated students via distance education where there are no alternatives.

Although distance education can help support students to undertake study from their own communities, to participate in distance education, students must have access to IT infrastructure, including a stable and fast internet connection. Whilst developments in IT infrastructure have greatly improved connectivity in some regional, rural and remote communities, other communities continue to experience difficulties in accessing these critical services.

Programs such as the School Student Broadband Initiative (SSBI) and the rollout of Community Wi-Fi in remote communities are critical to improving access to education for students particularly in remote areas. The SSBI initiative provides for up to 30,000 families with a primary or secondary student in their family with no internet access at home a free NBN service until 31 December 2025.<sup>46</sup> Approximately one third of families now accessing free broadband under the SSBI program are from regional, rural and remote areas.<sup>47</sup> The Commissioner supports the continuation of this program and would welcome its expansion to eligible tertiary students to ensure that these students are also able to access education virtually and have the digital tools they need to succeed.

44 Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia (ICPA), [2024 Federal Conference: Agenda Motions](#), Motion A 19, p 9.

45 ICPA, [2024 Federal Conference: Agenda Motions](#), Motion A 18, pp 8–9.

46 Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts, [School Student Broadband Initiative \(SSBI\)](#), [infrastructure.gov.au](#), accessed 31 October 2024.

47 Albanese A, and Rowland M, [Free broadband hits major milestone as digital gap shrinks for thousands of families](#), Prime Minister and Cabinet Media Centre, 1 August 2024.



### Issue for Consideration 21

Expand the School Student Broadband Initiative (SSBI) to eligible tertiary students to further increase educational access for students without affordable or reliable internet connectivity.

In 2024, the ICPA has continued to advocate for adequate internet access for rural and remote students, in particular service reliability.<sup>48</sup> The Commissioner supports their calls for better service where required for regional, rural and remote areas. Advancements in connectivity and digital infrastructure are a key focus of the 2024 Regional Telecommunications Review. The Commissioner, as a member of the Regional Telecommunications Independent Review Committee (in a separate capacity to her role as Regional Education Commissioner) has been exploring the existing and future telecommunication needs in regional, rural and remote Australia.

## Boarding schools

For those regional, rural and remote students without a local school or distance education program that can meet their educational needs, boarding school is their only other option to access education. Approximately 14,500 children from regional, rural and remote Australia rely on boarding schools to finish their education, representing approximately three quarters of all boarders across Australia.<sup>49</sup>

With no federal or state recurrent funding for boarding facilities, schools are unable to subsidise these costs so they fall to the families of boarders – the majority of whom are from regional, rural and remote areas.<sup>50</sup> Costs for boarding can range from \$25,000 to \$75,000 a year.<sup>51</sup> This places a significant financial burden on families who can afford it, particularly those that may have fluctuating incomes, and excludes it as an option altogether for many low-income families.

*'I often fight against people who say it's only the elite kids that are boarders. In fact, 76 per cent of our boarders in Australia are kids from rural and remote areas. They actually don't have a lot of choice but to go to boarding school because there is no high school in their local area.'*<sup>52</sup>

Richard Stokes, Chief Executive Officer, Australian Boarding School Association (ABSA)

The Australian government subsidy, the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Scheme, provides some financial assistance to families through an annual basic payment of \$9,960, with an additional payment of \$2,856 for low-income families who earn below \$62,634.<sup>53</sup> However, this payment is only available to students who meet certain eligibility criteria, including that they live more than 56 kilometres away from their nearest government school.<sup>54</sup> Families who do not meet this criteria may still need to travel a considerable distance to their nearest

48 ICPA, 2024 Federal Conference: Agenda Motions, Motions A 12 and A 13, pp 6–7.

49 Australian Boarding Schools Association, *Census 2024*, May 2024, p 30.

50 Independent Schools Australia, *Independent Boarding: A National Perspective*, March 2022, pp 18–21.

51 Ellis V, *Boarding School costs 'frightening' for remote NT families, ICPA calls for more support*, ABC News, 13 March 2024.

52 Kelsey-Sugg, A and Werden, C *Australian boarding schools offer an education lifeline for regional and remote families, but some still hold criticisms*, ABC News, 3 September 2024.

53 Department of Social Services, *Assistance for Isolated Children Scheme Guidelines*, 1 January 2024, p 101.

54 Department of Social Services, *Assistance for Isolated Children Scheme Guidelines*, p 29.

school but do not receive any funding support. Even if a family is eligible, due to rising boarding costs, the payment now only covers between 33 – 44 per cent of average boarding fees.<sup>55</sup>

To assist these families, the ICPA has advocated for an increase to the basic allowance of at least \$4,000 and alignment of the allowance to the Consumer Price Index.<sup>56</sup> This issue has also been raised in the Commissioner's 2022 and 2023 Issues for Consideration and it remains an issue in 2024 that requires urgent consideration.

#### Issue for Consideration 4

Increase the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Basic Boarding Allowance to ease financial pressures for geographically isolated families caused by boarding fees.

The Commonwealth Regional Scholarship Program pilot provides an additional way for those families that meet eligibility criteria to help fund part of boarding school education for their children. Commencing this year, the pilot program provides 50 scholarships worth \$20,000, and 50 scholarships worth \$10,000, to eligible regional, rural and remote students for every year of their secondary schooling.<sup>57</sup> The Commissioner was involved in the development of the program's guidelines and provided input for the evaluation.

With over three times as many applications as scholarships available,<sup>58</sup> there is a clear need for this program to continue. If the evaluation shows that the program has been successful in assisting regional, rural and remote families, the Commissioner would support its expansion to help a greater number of regional, rural and remote boarders.

### Scholarships for regional, rural and remote First Nations Students

Access to secondary education in some remote First Nations communities is limited, which means boarding school is the only option. However, the costs of boarding schools can be a barrier for these First Nations students to access further education.<sup>59</sup>

To support these students, in 2025–2026, nine scholarship providers will be funded to support more than 2,200 First Nations secondary students, including around 1,000 First Nations boarding students from mainly regional and remote areas.<sup>60</sup> These scholarships support students to overcome challenges that may otherwise prevent them from completing high school and pursuing tertiary education or going straight to the workforce.

As such, the Commissioner believes these scholarships should be demand-driven and not capped. Funding boarding school scholarships for all First Nations students living in communities where there is no secondary school has the potential to be transformative for the students and their communities.

55 Schubert S, [Boarding school costs weigh heavily on 13-year-old after scholarship rejection](#), ABC News, 3 February 2024.

56 ICPA, 2024 Federal Conference: Agenda Motions, Motion A1, p 1.

57 Chisholm A, [Commonwealth Regional Scholarship pilot program attracts strong interest](#), Ministers of the Education Portfolio Media Centre, 30 January 2024.

58 353 applications were submitted for 100 scholarships. See: Chisholm A, *Commonwealth Regional Scholarship pilot program attracts strong interest*.

59 Independent Schools Council of Australia, [2020-21 Pre-Budget Submission: Urgent need for additional resourcing for Indigenous boarding schools](#), 2020.

60 McCarthy M, [\\$45 million to extend funding for First Nations scholarships](#), Prime Minister and Cabinet Media Centre, 3 September 2024.

### Issue for Consideration 5

To ensure that all students living in remote First Nations communities where there is no secondary school can access secondary education options, consider demand-driven funding for boarding school scholarships for First Nations students from regional, rural and remote areas.

## Boarding On Country

With over 4,000 First Nations students attending boarding school,<sup>61</sup> it is vital that every student is able to have a culturally safe and beneficial boarding experience. For the majority of First Nations students, attending boarding school currently means leaving their community and Country. While this can yield positive experiences for students through pursuing further education and broadening their horizons, it can also result in feelings of isolation for students, worsened by lack of support for students and families, and social dislocation on return to their community.<sup>62</sup>

On Country boarding occurs where First Nations students are boarding close to home, family and their community. There are a number of government programs to increase the options for students to remain On Country and connected to their communities while pursuing their education.<sup>63</sup> For example, increasing the capacity of the On Country *Torres Strait Kaziw Meta* boarding home means that First Nations students from the Torres Strait Islands do not have to move to the mainland to study and can continue to be On Country and closer to their families.<sup>64</sup>

### CASE STUDY: Yiramalay Studio School

Under the Building Boarding Schools On Country measure, as part of the Closing the Gap Implementation Plan, Studio Schools of Australia received \$70.8 million over five years in funding to upgrade the Yiramalay Studio School, establish a new Indigenous Education and Research Centre, and build a new remote boarding school in Western Australia through the Studio Schools of Australia model.<sup>65</sup> At the Yiramalay Studio School, there has been a 78 per cent improvement in attendance,<sup>66</sup> and 74 per cent of students who graduated from Year 12 at Yiramalay were employed (in comparison to 30 per cent who live in very remote Australia).<sup>67</sup>

The Studio Schools Program is fully residential and On Country, and provides support for students across the full 24 hour day. This program allows for a strong focus on local culture and local Indigenous language which provides students with much greater sense of cultural safety than travelling to a city school thousands of kilometres from home.

61 Australian Boarding Schools Australia, 2024 Census, p 30.

62 O'Bryan M and Fogarty W, *Boarding off and on Country: A study of Education in one Northern Territory Remote Community*, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, September 2020, p 24.

63 National Indigenous Australians Agency, *Building On Country Boarding Schools*, niaa.gov.au, accessed 24 October 2024.

64 Burney L, *On-country boarding gives more Torres Strait students access to education*, Prime Minister and Cabinet Media Centre, 3 July 2024.

65 National Indigenous Australians Agency, *Building On Country Boarding Schools*.

66 Average class attendance of 41% at students' previous schools compared to 73% while at Yiramalay represents an improvement of 78%: Studio Schools of Australia, *2023 Annual Report*, June 2024, pp 26–27. There are currently 53 students across Years 10 – 12: MySchool, 'Yiramalay Studio School, Fitzroy Crossing WA', *Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, School profile, My School*, 2023, accessed 14 November 2024.

67 Studio Schools of Australia, *2023 Annual Report*, June 2024, pp 26–27.

Whilst these schools are significant opportunities for students in those areas, there remains a large number of First Nations children across the country in regional, rural and remote areas who need to consider alternative ways to access secondary schooling.

### Distance education On Country

For students who have no means to access boarding options either On Country or off Country, or those who want or need to remain in their communities, distance education On Country can offer a potential solution. In response to Priority Reform Two of the Closing the Gap Measure, \$9.34 million has been allocated to pilot community-led models of distance education in up to five remote communities in 2024 and 2025, aiming to provide culturally appropriate distance education for First Nations students.<sup>68</sup> An evaluation of existing distance education models is also being undertaken to determine how this sector can be improved to encourage more First Nations students to access and benefit from distance education. The evaluation will report by the end of 2025.

For distance education to work well, students need to be supported on the ground with the appropriate guidance and facilities to ensure that they can succeed. An opportunity to provide this type of support for students learning On Country could be to develop a Distance Assistance Study Hubs (DASH) program, modelled on the principles underpinning the successful Regional University Study Hubs (RUSH) program.

Under this model, local communities could apply for funding that would enable them to provide the facilities (space to study, devices, high speed internet connection), staff, and administrative, academic and wellbeing support that would benefit students in remote communities to successfully undertake study through distance education schools.

This model would enable students to study together On Country at a specialised distance education study hub, creating a peer group and supportive environment with learning delivered by a partner distance education school and in-person support provided by local staff. Ideally, these support staff could be drawn from the local community, providing employment opportunities and potential teacher training pathways for these staff members as well as a sustainable, homegrown workforce with a connection to the community and culture to support students through their secondary education. To ensure that the program meets the needs of First Nations students, the partner school would be required to demonstrate their cultural awareness capability. Local support staff could also work with students on specific First Nations learning, such as having sessions delivered by local Elders.

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<sup>68</sup> National Indigenous Australians Agency, [On Country Education for remote First Nations Students \(Distance Education\)](https://www.niaa.gov.au/first-nations-education/on-country-education-for-remote-first-nations-students), niaa.gov.au, accessed 24 October 2024.

*'Education for Aboriginal students will always operate within the structures of the 'guest paradigm'<sup>69</sup> while ever systems fail to understand the centrality of Country to Aboriginal identity and its critical role in affirming students culturally and building confidence and trust in their education journey. Centrality of Country is never about geography but is pivotal to Aboriginal culture and identity and enhances the prospects of education success. Aboriginal people's connection to Country shapes identity, a source of health and wellbeing, it is a source of knowledge and nourishes and sustains.*

*Knowing one's Country is critical to understanding kinship relationships, storylines oral traditions and cultures. Country provides understanding, appreciation and celebration of the interconnected symmetry of all creation and the teachings that have sustained Aboriginal peoples since the beginning of time.'*

Professor Bob Morgan AO

Chair, Board of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Education and Research (BATSIER)

Conjoint Professor, Wollotuka Institute, University of Newcastle

One of the benefits of this program is that it could be adapted and implemented for any First Nations community that has the need and be expanded beyond school age children if required. This could range from literacy and numeracy courses to online tertiary education. The Tertiary chapter of this report discusses the redesigned Foundation Skills program that now includes a First Nations delivery stream and can be completed via distance education. At the initial First Nations roundtable convened by the Commissioner, participants reflected on the opportunity for 'multi-generational' classrooms and the benefits for both First Nations children and adults to learn together and share their existing knowledge and skills from primary through to tertiary education.

In order to be sufficiently flexible and scalable to meet the needs of both larger regional and smaller remote First Nations communities, the program must be driven by the community. The local community is also best placed to identify what existing infrastructure is in place to support students and any gaps that need to be addressed.

<sup>69</sup> During the 1990s, as Director of the Jumbunna Indigenous House of Learning at the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS), Professor Bob Morgan AO coined the term the 'guest paradigm'. In his own words, Professor Morgan defines this term as 'the contested relationship of Aboriginal people with Eurocentric education systems wherein curriculum and pedagogical practices are almost completely devoid of Aboriginal relevance and therefore provides little means of cultural affirmation and intellectual enrichment for Aboriginal students'.

*'When remote, rural and regional areas are thriving, Australia truly thrives. In the context of education provision for such areas we could be accused of undermining this connection to Country by failing to provide adequate education provision at a local level. More recent developments in technology and Artificial Intelligence ensures that we can indeed provide a secondary and tertiary education to students in remote, rural and regional parts of Australia. It is indeed possible to deliver a secondary and tertiary education that can actually nurture and strengthen ones sense of identity and connection to Country, while at the same time ensure a level of growth, capacity and intellect that enables them to venture out into and thrive in other modern economies throughout the world.'*

Dr Chris Sarra, Founder and Chairman of the Stronger Smarter Institute

#### Issue for Consideration 17

Create a new program in First Nations communities to establish Distance Assistance Study Hubs (DASHs) to support On Country distance education learning for First Nations students, potentially commencing through a pilot, based on the principles of the Regional University Study Hubs program.

## Funding regional, rural and remote schools

To provide the best opportunities for the 1.1 million regional, rural and remote school students, their local schools need to be adequately funded.<sup>70</sup> Schools in regional, rural and remote areas receive a base amount for each student based on the Schooling Resource Standard (SRS) and additional loadings to recognise their support of equity cohorts, school location and school size.

The National School Resourcing Board undertook a review of the regional SRS loadings and delivered its report in 2023.<sup>71</sup> Ultimately, the review concluded that due to a lack of available data from individual schools, there was 'insufficient evidence' to suggest that any changes were required to funding amounts provided to regional and remote schools through the school location and school size loadings.<sup>72</sup> Under the Better and Fairer Schools Agreement, a review of the SRS base and loadings calculation methodology is required to be provided to Education Ministers by mid-2029.<sup>73</sup>

<sup>70</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, [Table 46a Students \(STE\) by ASGS Remoteness Indicator, 2023](#), 14 February 2024.

<sup>71</sup> National School Resourcing Board, [Review of Regional Schooling Resource Standards Loadings](#), February 2023.

<sup>72</sup> National School Resourcing Board, [Review of Regional Schooling Resource Standards Loadings](#), p i.

<sup>73</sup> Commonwealth of Australia, [Heads of Agreement \(Better and Fairer Schools Agreement 2025-2034\)](#), 31 July 2024, p 34.

For the many non-government schools in regional, rural and remote communities, the federal contribution to the base amount of funding under the SRS is discounted by the non-government school community's capacity to contribute (CTC) financially to the costs of schooling using the median family income of the parents and guardians of children attending the school (Direct Measure of Income (DMI)).<sup>74</sup>

Stakeholders have raised concerns with the Commissioner around the consequences of the timing of the DMI calculation release for regional, rural and remote non-government school funding. The DMI calculation is currently released two months prior to the start of the new school year, which stakeholders have noted to the Commissioner gives schools a very short period of time over school holidays to make any budgetary adjustments, notify families of any fee increase, and occurs well after schools have finalised their forward planning. Concerns raised include that even a slight change in a DMI score can have implications on the amount of funding that a school receives, resulting in shortfalls that may have to be passed on to regional families through increased school costs. Consideration should be given to the fact that if families are unable to afford any fee increase, they may then have to find an alternative school for their child in the short period of time before the new school year commences, which may be very challenging.

#### Issue for Consideration 10

Consider extending the implementation timeline for the release of the Direct Measure of Income calculation from the current two months to 14 months to provide regional, rural and remote schools and families with sufficient time to respond appropriately to any impact that may result from changes in the calculation.

## Supporting regional students to succeed

There are a greater number of regional, rural and remote students who need additional learning support compared with students in metropolitan schools. In major cities, 60 per cent of students met the PISA National Proficient Standard for reading literacy, compared to 49 per cent in regional areas (inner regional and outer regional) and 35 per cent in remote (remote and very remote) areas.<sup>75</sup> In the 2024 NAPLAN results, there remained a clear divide between outcomes of metropolitan schools and regional and remote schools, for example only 24 per cent of Year 3 students from very remote schools were rated as 'strong' or 'exceeding' in Reading compared to 70.7 per cent of Year 3 students from major city schools.<sup>76</sup>

Learning difficulties compound over time, and students who fall behind early in schooling will often find it very difficult to catch up and are at higher risk of leaving school early.<sup>77</sup> There is a higher proportion of these students in need of early intervention in regional, rural and remote areas than in city schools. Identifying young regional, rural and remote students who need additional support to succeed must be prioritised in primary school to help prevent these students from falling behind their peers.

<sup>74</sup> Department of Education, [Direct Measure of Income \(DMI\) Methodology](#), Australian Government, April 2024.

<sup>75</sup> De Bortoli L, Underwood C and Thomson S, [PISA 2022: Reporting Australia's results: Report Volume 1 Student performance and equity in education](#), Australian Council for Educational Research, 2023, p xxviii.

<sup>76</sup> Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), [NAPLAN National Results](#), NAPLAN achievement for Year 3 in reading by student background [data set] 2024, [acara.edu.au](#), accessed 30 October 2024.

<sup>77</sup> Groves, O and Lu L, [Fewer than 1 in 5 students who are behind in Year 3 catch up and stay caught up](#), Australian Education Research Organisation, 21 August 2023.

The Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System identified the importance of early intervention, such as Year 1 phonics and early years numeracy checks, to ensure that those students who are struggling receive targeted and intensive supports, including small group or catch-up tutoring.<sup>78</sup> While these strategies are evidence-based, this type of support depends on adequate resourcing within regional, rural and remote schools. In addition, it is difficult to improve educational outcomes for students without considering other issues, such as developmental factors, that may impact a student's learning.

## Access to allied health services

Students in regional, rural and remote areas represent one third of students living with disability despite only accounting for around one quarter of the school population.<sup>79</sup> Approximately 85,000 students in inner regional areas and 38,200 students in outer regional, remote and very remote areas are living with disability.<sup>80</sup> Even with increased learning support, regional, rural and remote students with developmental delay or who live with disability will still have more difficulty accessing allied health services locally than children in metropolitan areas. In addition to common barriers such as financial limitations and support for parents and carers, regional, rural and remote families also face large distances to travel to access support and long waitlists.<sup>81</sup>

### Full-service schools

Under the full-service school model, schools work in collaborative partnership with service providers to provide a 'hub' of community, social and/or health services to students and the community, to complement the educational role of schools and help students obtain necessary support more easily.<sup>82</sup> The Western Australian government will trial a full-service school model in four metropolitan public schools from 2026<sup>83</sup> aligned with a recommendation of the Review to Inform a Fairer and Better Education System, which explored the benefits of full-service models for students, families and the community.<sup>84</sup> If the trial is positive, the full-service school model may be an option to assist regional, rural and remote families to access allied health services.

### Allied health services

Community organisations such as Royal Far West are working closely with regional, rural and remote schools to increase access to allied health services through a range of supports, including group programs and individual allied health assessment and therapy.<sup>85</sup> To ensure that access is extended to more remote communities, these services are delivered through a hybrid model of in-person and telehealth.

Under Royal Far West's early intervention pilot program, Better Learning Better Lives, allied health services, including occupational and speech therapy, were provided to over 560 children at five rural and remote schools

78 Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Schools Agreement, [Improving Outcomes for All: The Report of the Independent Expert Panel's Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System](#), Department of Education, December 2023.

79 In 2018, an estimated 380,000 children aged 5–18 with disability attended primary or secondary school – Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, [People with disability in Australia](#), 23 April 2024. Of 4,081,627 students in total school population, 1,119,166 students are in regional and remote Australia – ABS, [Students by ASGS Remoteness Indicator](#), 2023.

80 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, [People with disability in Australia](#).

81 Royal Far West, [Better Learning Better Lives Pilot Evaluation Summary](#), August 2024, p 4.

82 [Improving Outcomes for All: The Report of the Independent Expert Panel's Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System](#), p 99–100.

83 Albanese A, Cook R, Clare J and Buti T, [Landmark agreement signed to fully fund Western Australian public schools](#), Prime Minister and Cabinet Media Centre, 3 September 2024.

84 [Improving Outcomes for All: The Report of the Independent Expert Panel's Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System](#), p 104 (Recommendation 2B).

85 Royal Far West, [Better Learning Better Lives Pilot Evaluation Summary](#), pp 3–4.



in Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria, in-person and via telehealth during the 2023 school year.<sup>86</sup> In addition to direct assessment and therapy provided to these students, the program also facilitated group sessions with children and their parents and carers, and professional development training for teachers.

The program's evaluation found 87 per cent of children achieved or exceeded their goal, with notable improvements in mental health, learning engagement and classroom behaviour. Eighty per cent of parents strongly agreed they felt more confident supporting their child's learning and development and 97 per cent of educators said they were more confident supporting the children they work with as a result of the learning (from the development workshops).<sup>87</sup>

Delivering early intervention and development assessments directly through a school also allows for parents and carers and the school to put in place interventions to improve the child's development. It also gives the school opportunity to easily track progress of children, and to inform teachers where children may require additional and targeted support.

*'Programs like this can really improve the outcomes and trajectory for country children who have limited access to vital supports and services. More needs to be done to ensure country children are not disadvantaged, and funding for programs that we know make an impact, such as this one, should be considered.'*<sup>88</sup>

Jacqueline Emery, CEO, Royal Far West

#### Commissioner's Note

To expand access to critical allied health services to students in regional, rural and remote schools, the Australian Government should work with state and territory governments to explore funding options for organisations to deliver these services in partnerships with schools.

## Retaining regional, rural and remote students to Year 12

The impact of completing Year 12 for a regional, rural or remote student should not be underestimated. Attending school through to Year 12 provides young people with greater chances of future success and opens doors to future possibilities – most immediately in its pathway to tertiary education. Research from The Smith Family shows that tertiary education brings positive social and economic outcomes, including greater income and job security, the ability to have more choice in future jobs, physical and mental health and active participation in the community.<sup>89</sup> There are of course some students, particularly in regional, rural and remote areas, who leave school to undertake an apprenticeship, traineeship or get a job rather than finishing school and continuing on to tertiary education. These pathways can have significantly positive outcomes for

<sup>86</sup> Royal Far West, *Better Learning Better Lives Pilot Evaluation Summary*, p 3.

<sup>87</sup> Royal Far West, *Better Learning Better Lives Pilot Evaluation Summary*, pp 5–7.

<sup>88</sup> Royal Far West, [Royal Far West's innovative early learning program improves mental health for country kids](#), 27 August 2024.

<sup>89</sup> The Smith Family, [Pathways, Engagement and Transitions: Experiences of early school leavers](#), 2024, pp 2–4.

those students who move from their training into a full time job, and should be considered as successful as pursuing a post-school pathway into university.

However, for those students who are leaving school for other reasons, such as disengagement, this decision has significant impacts on their future social, financial and health positions, including their ability to engage in work or study. It is these students who we need to actively engage to complete Year 12 in order to realise the many benefits for both that student and our wider community.

More students from historically underrepresented cohorts, such as regional, rural and remote students, will need to complete their Year 12 education in order to address predicted future workforce needs.

The Australian Government has set an ambitious target for 80 per cent of the workforce to have a university degree or VET qualification by 2050.<sup>90</sup> However, this will be difficult to achieve whilst there is still a clearly pronounced gap between the school completion rates for regional, rural and remote students and metropolitan students.

In metropolitan areas, the proportion of students obtaining a secondary certificate is close to 80 per cent, however this falls to around 68 per cent in inner and outer regional areas and 55 per cent in remote and very remote areas.<sup>91</sup>

Retaining students in regional, rural and remote areas to Year 12 can be challenging for teachers and schools. Regional, rural and remote schools should be supported to provide their students with the best experience possible – ensuring that there are the opportunities and engagement to help them feel motivated to continue to attend. It is also important that there are mechanisms in place to support students who may be at risk of falling behind in school, and that responses to support them are identified early. As above, there are reasons why a student may wish to leave school and pursue an alternative pathway to Year 12 – but lack of support or opportunities should not be one of them.

School attendance is an important factor for the success of students in and outside of the classroom.<sup>92</sup> However, the further away you get from the city, the less children attend school – the attendance rate for full-time enrolled students is around 90 per cent in major cities compared to around 65 per cent in very remote areas.<sup>93</sup> For First Nations students, the attendance rate is 80 per cent in major cities compared to 55 per cent in very remote areas.<sup>94</sup> There are a number of reasons why this could be the case – access to subjects, long distances or other barriers to get to school can impact attendance and completion of secondary schooling. For First Nations students, cultural obligations and traditions such as Sorry Business may also affect attendance at school.

Not-for-profit organisations such as the Clontarf Foundation and the Stars Foundation work with First Nations young people throughout secondary school to increase attendance, help complete their Year 12 schooling and transition successfully into a post-secondary school pathway.

90 Australian Government, [Australian Universities Accord – Budget Summary](#), 15 May 2024, p 5.

91 ACARA, [Year 12 Certification Rates](#), Year 12 certification rates by geolocation, sex and state/territory, 2022.

92 Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, [Spotlight – Attendance Matters](#), 2019, p 3.

93 ACARA, [Student attendance](#), Student Attendance rate by geographical location, school sector and state/territory for Years 1–10 [data set] 2023.

94 ACARA, [Student attendance](#), Student Attendance rate by school sector and state/territory for Years 1–10 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students [data set] 2023, accessed 30 October 2024.

### CASE STUDY: Clontarf Foundation

Clontarf Foundation aims to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young men to stay engaged with schooling through to the end of Year 12, and assist them into further education and employment. The programs are facilitated through 158 academies within 168 schools across Australia. Using sport as the incentive, the programs work with young First Nations students to increase attendance, encourage behavioural change, develop positive attitudes and ultimately, encourage First Nations students to complete school, pursue higher education or find employment.<sup>95</sup> The Clontarf Foundation reported in 2022 that 834 boys supported by the program completed Year 12, and 84 per cent of boys who completed Year 12 in 2021 remained in jobs or further education 12 months after leaving school.<sup>96</sup>

### CASE STUDY: Stars Foundation

Stars Foundation provides a mentoring program specifically tailored to meet the needs of First Nations girls and young women through work placements, mentorships, sports programs, wellbeing camps and excursions, with the aim of helping these young women to remain engaged in school, complete Year 12 and successfully transition into work, training, or further education. Stars Foundation supports over 3,400 First Nations female students across 62 primary and secondary schools. In 2023, 92 per cent of Stars participants completed Year 12, 85 per cent had a successful transition to work or further study and recorded an average attendance rate of 78 per cent.<sup>97</sup>

In 2024, the Commissioner engaged with stakeholders and commissioned research to determine how best to retain regional, rural and remote students to Year 12. Similar to the findings of the Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System<sup>98</sup> and The Smith Family's 2024 Pathways, Engagement and Transitions Report 3,<sup>99</sup> some of the key practices included enabling regional students to access subject areas that align with their interests, nurturing their aspiration through early and specialised careers advice, and building the capacity of the teaching workforce. Providing tangible career pathways to students can demonstrate the value of their education and help them make informed decisions about their future.

<sup>95</sup> Clontarf Foundation, [Clontarf Foundation](https://clontarf.org.au), clontarf.org.au, 2024, accessed 30 October 2024.

<sup>96</sup> Clontarf Foundation, [Clontarf Foundation Annual Report 2022](#), 2024, p 3.

<sup>97</sup> Stars Foundation, [Supporting Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Girls](#), starsfoundation.org.au, accessed 30 October 2024.

<sup>98</sup> Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Schools Agreement, *Improving Outcomes for All: The Report of the Independent Expert Panel's Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System*.

<sup>99</sup> The Smith Family, [Pathways, Engagement and Transitions: Experiences of early school leavers](#), 2024.

## Access to secondary subjects

Secondary students in regional, rural and remote schools have access to a limited variety of secondary subjects compared to their peers at metropolitan schools. In New South Wales, a student studying at a remote or very remote government school will have on average 9 subjects to choose from compared to a student in a major city government school, which offers on average 26 subjects.<sup>100</sup> This lack of access can have an impact on a student's aspiration, engagement and future tertiary pathway. At a base level, ATAR remains the main entry pathway for school leavers applying to most universities. Students need to study ATAR subjects in order to qualify for an ATAR, however in some remote areas, the number of ATAR subjects offered and the take up by students is around half the rate compared to metropolitan areas.<sup>101</sup>

Some universities also require students to have studied particular subjects at secondary school in order to be accepted into a course (usually science or math-based). These prerequisites allow universities to select students who have shown interest in and aptitude for relevant subjects and ensure secondary school students have undertaken subjects that provide the best preparation for university study.<sup>102</sup>

Regional, rural and remote students without access to these secondary subjects are either unable to follow their desired tertiary pathway or have to rely on catch-up or bridging courses. Even where universities do not have prerequisites, those regional, rural and remote students who have not had the opportunity to study these subjects at secondary school may struggle with university coursework. For students with a particular interest in a topic or aspiration for a future career direction, if they are unable to study this subject, it could lead to wider disengagement from schooling.

In 2024, the Regional Education Commissioner received input from teachers, principals, students and researchers to further explore the 2023 Issue for Consideration regarding senior secondary subject access and its impact on tertiary pathways in regional and remote Australia.

Challenges in recruiting teachers and low student numbers are the main reasons for the smaller range of secondary subjects in regional, rural and remote schools. In stakeholder conversations, such as the South Australian Rural Youth Ambassadors Forum, students shared their experiences of classes not running if they did not have enough student enrolment. Across this student group, the subjects that did not run varied; some students spoke of a lack of STEM subjects, while others spoke of no technology, arts and languages classes running at their schools.

Research shows that the average 15-year old from remote Australia is around 1.5 years behind metropolitan students in science and significantly below the international average in mathematics due to limited access to these subjects due to resourcing issues (both teachers and facilities).<sup>103</sup>

Distance education is offered as the most common solution for regional, rural and remote students unable to access their subject of choice at their own school.

100 Dean J, Downes N, and Roberts P, [Access to and equity in the curriculum in the Australian government secondary school system](#), *SN Social Sciences*, 2023 vol.3 (article 64), p 12.

101 WA Department of Education, [Pathways to Post-School Success Review of Western Australian senior secondary pathways: Discussion paper](#), 24 October 2023, p 4.

102 Office of the Chief Scientist, [Mapping University Prerequisites in Australia](#), September 2020, p 23.

103 Department of Education, [Remote, rural and regional students](#), National STEM education resources toolkit, accessed 28 Oct 2024.

## Distance education

Delivery by distance education involves virtual delivery of curriculum from a specialised school, or through a virtual network. Students can access a wide range of subjects through distance education, and can either study single subjects through distance education, or can study all their subjects through distance education.

Examples include Aurora College, a virtual selective school for regional students in NSW from Years 5–12. Students enrolled in a local regional NSW state school can access the Aurora selective streams in mathematics, science, English and technology through a virtual learning environment. Residential Camps are held twice yearly to deliver practical lessons, specialist excursions, and provide social opportunities for students to meet their peers. These excursions require geographically isolated students to be able to afford and undertake travel for these types of activities.<sup>104</sup>

State distance education schools, such as the Schools of Isolated and Distance Education (SIDE) in Western Australia, and the Finigan School of Distance Education and the Dubbo School of Distance Education in New South Wales, offer programs to provide students with teaching and learning programs where there are limitations at their base school, or where students meet the criteria to study from home. The Victorian Virtual Learning Network (VVLN), run out of Bendigo, is an example of a brick and mortar school that has developed a distance education program to support students who could not otherwise access specialist secondary subjects.

### CASE STUDY: Victorian Virtual Learning Network (VVLN)

The VVLN is an initiative of Bendigo Senior Secondary College to develop innovative, interactive, instructional online VCE subjects designed to be delivered online to secondary school students across Victoria. Over a decade, VVLN has reached over 1900 students in over 130 schools to enable them to access secondary subjects that are not available at their home school, including Chemistry, Physics, Psychology, Specialist Maths and Accounting.

Self-paced learning and regular online contact with teachers ensures that the subjects can be undertaken with both a high degree of flexibility and support for students.<sup>105</sup>

## Making online delivery work well

Online delivery can yield positive student outcomes when all participants are able to actively participate in learning, particularly where some students may be in the classroom and other students online. In stakeholder engagement, however, there was mixed feedback on these models from students who were undertaking one or more subjects – particularly around the adeptness of their teachers in managing the technology associated with online learning, whilst balancing large workloads and classroom behaviour. Students spoke of attending classes as the sole online student, where a class was being taught in-person at another school, and finding it difficult to engage with the teacher or other students.

A perception is held by some that online learning is inferior to face-to-face delivery, which can lead to students being discouraged from taking it up. The rapid technological development and shifts in community attitudes and ways of working that arose as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic have greatly improved online learning

<sup>104</sup> Aurora College, [Aurora College](https://aurora.schools.nsw.gov.au), [aurora.schools.nsw.gov.au](https://aurora.schools.nsw.gov.au), accessed 1 November 2024.

<sup>105</sup> Victorian Virtual Learning Network, [Victorian Virtual Learning Network - Our Courses](https://vln.vic.edu.au), [vln.vic.edu.au](https://vln.vic.edu.au), accessed 30 Oct 2024.

opportunities for students. When online learning is done well, it is a good alternative, when required, to traditional face-to-face teaching.

Teaching to a virtual audience requires educators to adopt new methods of communication to run their classes. It is important that teachers are provided with access to specialised training prior to delivering classes online. In particular, teachers at distance education schools who deliver courses to students with disability should have access to training that equips them to support the diverse learning needs of students with disability. Access to training is critical to ensure that teachers are empowered to better support all their students, and that students are receiving high-quality teaching in an online environment.

### Commissioner's Note

For students to thrive in an online environment, particularly in hybrid classes, teachers need the necessary skills training to deliver classes in this learning environment.

For remote students undertaking distance education, it can be a lonely endeavour. Students spoke of difficulties finding an appropriate location to attend classes and the benefits of peer interaction when studying. Programs like the Rural Learning Exchange, which creates subject-specific networks for senior secondary teachers and students to collaborate, recognise the value of creating forums where students can learn from each other.<sup>106</sup> The program is currently being piloted in New South Wales regional, rural and remote schools with a secondary school enrolment of under 300 students.<sup>107</sup>

Regional University Study Hubs can also provide a valuable opportunity for students studying distance education subjects to connect. These are discussed further in the Tertiary Education chapter.

## Local delivery model

Students need the full support of their school in order to successfully undertake single-subject study via distance education. Some students and teachers have told the Commissioner that timetabling and resourcing issues had made this type of study difficult for both schools and students. Accessing subjects through a local delivery model, driven by local schools partnering with each other, can help address some of the challenges that arise through distance education delivery.

Where schools are unable to attract specialist teachers in all subject areas, or do not have enough students to run a subject, sharing teaching and curriculum resources with other schools within a region can allow an efficient distribution of resources.

The 'local delivery' or 'cluster' model involves a network of secondary schools with a smaller range of secondary subjects to combine resources to allow students to be taught by a teacher in a school within the network, either online or in-person, where the subject is not available in their own school. These programs are run depending on the needs of the schools involved and vary in terms of the number of schools in the cluster.

<sup>106</sup> NSW Department of Education, [Rural Learning Exchange](https://www.education.gov.au/rural-learning-exchange), education.gov.au, accessed 1 November 2024.

<sup>107</sup> NSW Department of Education, [Rural Learning Exchange](https://www.education.gov.au/rural-learning-exchange).

### CASE STUDY: Eyre Peninsula Secondary Alliance

The Eyre Peninsula Secondary Alliance is a network of 16 South Australian schools who work together to deliver a wide range of secondary subjects to their students, including VET courses. The Alliance has a core local delivery curriculum based on STEM subjects such as specialised maths, physics, biology, chemistry, and psychology. These subjects are delivered across a range of sites, both in-person and through online attendance.<sup>108</sup>

### CASE STUDY: New South Wales Government Access Program

To enable regional, rural and remote senior secondary students to complete their secondary education at their local school, this program provides a shared curriculum across five clusters of isolated schools. Students interact with their teacher and each other through videoconferencing and other collaborative technologies.<sup>109</sup> New South Wales school principals with experience of the Access Program spoke positively about this model – in particular the opportunities for one-on-one access to teachers and opportunities to have sessions in-person for science practicums and excursions.

Another variation on this model focuses on centralising curriculum development within a local cluster of schools. Curriculum for the specialist subject is created by one teacher, who then provides guidance to local teachers within the school cluster to enable them to deliver the subject. This model is currently being trialled in Queensland as part of a response to Teacher Workload under the National Teacher Workforce Action Plan. Funding has been provided to create a Head of Department – Curriculum role which will work across a cluster of schools providing targeted expertise, support and guidance for clusters of small schools in the development of curriculum, including resources considerate of the local context.<sup>110</sup>

## Information on options for accessing secondary subjects

In the Commissioner's discussions with stakeholders, it is clear that improving access to secondary subjects is a critical issue for regional, rural and remote students and schools. There is no 'one size fits all' solution – regional, rural and remote communities have unique needs. However, the examples above provide guidance to regional schools and students about ways in which students can access a greater variety of secondary subjects. A key challenge is ensuring that information on options available for studying subjects outside the school's curriculum is readily available to students or schools, or presented as an option by schools.

Regional peak leadership bodies can be one avenue where different models for delivery can be introduced, and schools could collectively discuss potential partnerships. For example, the South Australian Area School Leaders Association, a representative association of principals and other leaders from schools in South Australia, meet quarterly and hold an annual conference to discuss key challenges facing the education sector and share expertise. Some members are also part of driving the successful Eyre Peninsula Secondary Alliance SA. Developing a national peak body for regional, rural and remote leaders is discussed further below.

<sup>108</sup> Eyre Peninsula Schools Local Delivery, [About Us – EP Schools Local Delivery](https://epschools.sa.gov.au), epschools.sa.gov.au, accessed 1 November 2024.

<sup>109</sup> NSW Department of Education, [Access program](https://education.gov.au), education.gov.au, accessed 1 November 2024.

<sup>110</sup> Department of Education, [Workload Reduction Fund – Action 12 of the National Teacher Workforce Action Plan](#), Federation Funding Agreement – Education and Skills, July 2024, accessed 1 November 2024.

## Educator workforce

Becoming a teacher is one of the most rewarding professions a person can have. Teachers have the opportunity to shape and influence the lives of their students, and great teachers are remembered and valued for life. Teachers, alongside other key workers, are the pillars of regional, rural and remote communities.<sup>111</sup> They also have the most direct impact on children's learning in schools.<sup>112</sup>

While incentives can be useful in increasing the educator workforce in the regions, to build a sustainable teaching workforce in our regional, rural and remote schools, we need to ensure that opportunities are in place to homegrow the educator workforce within the regions. It is also important to ensure that teachers are appreciated and rewarded in recognition of their role and have the support to develop and pursue professional opportunities.

### Out-of-field teaching

The Commissioner's 2023 Annual Report identified the high rates of out-of-field teaching in regional, rural and remote schools and proposed that these teachers be offered subsidised courses to undertake upskilling in specialist areas.

It is pleasing to see that several of the courses awarded funding under the Microcredentials Pilot program will be provided by regional universities specifically directed at teaching STEM subjects for out-of-field teachers.<sup>113</sup> Microcredentials are short, focused courses in a specific area of study, designed to teach and upskill learners with targeted, job-relevant skills.<sup>114</sup> Under the Microcredentials Pilot program, Charles Sturt University will offer courses in Science for Out-of-Field Teachers and Mathematics for Out-of-Field Teachers, while Southern Cross University offers a Postgraduate Certificate in Teaching Mathematics for Out-of-Field Teachers. These courses support teachers who are working outside their field of expertise to upskill in these STEM areas and provide a homegrown solution to the STEM teacher shortage in regional, rural and remote schools.

### Gaining practical experience in regional, rural and remote schools

In her 2023 Annual Report, the Commissioner highlighted the need to provide guidance to early career teachers about what they could expect teaching in a regional, rural or remote area as part of their teacher training. By ensuring that early career teachers feel supported and empowered to work in regional, rural and remote communities, this will bring benefits not only to their career, but to their students and community.

For those teachers already in the workforce at a regional, rural or remote school, or thinking about working in these areas, microcredentials can provide an opportunity to gain new skills relevant to teaching in regional, rural and remote areas. As part of the expansion of the Australian Government's Microcredentials Pilot in Higher Education, the University of Canberra will be funded to deliver a Professional Certificate in Education (Regional and Rural).<sup>115</sup> This short course will provide education graduates with a deepened knowledge of issues specific to education in regional, rural and remote areas from mid-2025.

111 Bourne K, Nash A and Houghton K, *Pillars of communities: Service delivery professionals in small Australian towns 1981–2011*, p 6.

112 Halsey J, [Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education: Final Report](#), Department of Education and Training, January 2018, p 38.

113 Department of Education, [Microcredentials Pilot in Higher Education](#), education.gov.au accessed 30 October 2024.

114 Clare J, [New microcredential courses to support in-demand jobs](#), Ministers of the Education Portfolio Media Centre, 11 June 2023.

115 Department of Education, *Microcredentials Pilot in Higher Education*.



### **Teachers' Aide Gap Year**

For secondary students who may be considering a career as a teacher, gaining practical experience in a regional, rural or remote school would help them to determine whether they want to pursue this pathway and could provide the first step into their further education and career beyond. One proposal, put forward in previous Annual Reports from the Commissioner, involved Year 12 school leavers working as a Teachers' Aide in a regional, rural or remote primary school for one year following completion of their secondary education.

Many regional, rural and remote students take a 'gap year' following Year 12 in order to work and save money to relocate for university.<sup>116</sup> Working as a Teachers' Aide, providing in-classroom and administrative support to teachers, would present school leavers with an opportunity to earn money whilst also gaining valuable workforce experience to support their future career pathway, whether as an entry point into the education workforce or another profession.

Working in classrooms alongside qualified teachers would provide participants with hands-on experience of what is required as a teacher, build connections to their local school, and also provide some much needed support in the classroom for teachers struggling with administrative workload.

To increase the visibility of Teachers' Aide roles as an option for school leavers, a local regional organisation, such as Regional Development Australia, could invite expressions of interest from regional, rural and remote schools seeking a Teachers' Aide and enable Year 12 students and recent school leavers to submit an application. The organisation would then connect suitable applicants with schools in need. Creating a formal system to easily connect schools with school leavers would assist with providing much needed support to teachers in the classroom, while also giving young people the opportunity to get a taste of working in a regional, rural and remote classroom whilst earning money during a gap year.

#### **Issue for Consideration 7**

To improve opportunities for school leavers to gain practical experience, and to assist regional, rural and remote schools to provide more support to teachers, explore the creation of an online portal where regional, rural and remote schools can advertise Teachers' Aide roles and connect with interested Year 12 students and recent school leavers.

### **Leadership in regional, rural and remote education**

Leading a regional, rural or remote school is a very different proposition to running a metropolitan school, and requires a different set of skills. Given the vital and community-embedded role of principals and other leaders in regional, rural and remote schools<sup>117</sup>, these established and future leaders should be provided with specialised professional development to support their roles and bring benefits to their school community.

Education-specific courses in rural leadership, developed as part of the Microcredentials Pilot Program referred to above, would provide much needed training to develop these future leaders in the regions.

<sup>116</sup> Department of Education, Skills and Employment, [Factors affecting Higher Education Completions – Gap-years](#), 2020, p 2.

<sup>117</sup> Eacott S, Niesche R, Heffernan A, Loughland T, Gobby B, and Durksen T, [High-impact school leadership: regional, rural and remote schools](#), Department of Education, Skills and Employment, Australia, 2021, p 16.

The importance of rural education-specific leadership training is demonstrated in the emergence and rapid growth of a comparative example in New Zealand. The New Zealand Rural Schools Leadership Association supports rural principals through professional learning and has grown to include more than 400 rural principals in New Zealand.

### **CASE STUDY:** The New Zealand Rural Schools Leadership Association

This association was established in 2020 to better support rural principals through professional learning. During their August visit to Australia, the Commissioner was invited to meet with the President and Deputy President of the New Zealand Rural Schools Association, along with a group of school principals and academics from New Zealand, to discuss the establishment and functions of the Regional Education Commissioner role and key issues affecting regional education in Australia.



*Image Caption: New Zealand Rural Schools Association and associates visit Cootamundra, NSW  
L-R: Cynthia Avoda, University of Canberra, Dr Lucy Webster, Regional Education Commissioner Secretariat, Jane Corcoran, Deputy to the President, NZ Rural Schools Leadership Association, Professor Philip Roberts, University of Canberra, Andrew King, President, NZ Rural Schools Leadership Association, Natalie Downs, University of Canberra, Dr Anna-Maria Fjellman, University of Gothenburg, Dr Jennifer Tatebe, Auckland University, Dr Jenny Dean, University of Canberra*

Being able to exchange ideas and strategies with other leaders about how to improve educational outcomes in regional, rural and remote communities would have many benefits for these school leaders. However, although there are a number of bodies at a state and local levels supporting regional, rural and remote school leaders, there is currently no coordinated organisation at a national level to facilitate this expanded network.

A national peak body for regional, rural and remote education leaders would provide the regions with a national forum to discuss good practices and provide targeted professional development for school leaders to support them to improve regional, rural and remote outcomes. It would also provide a mentoring environment for new leaders and future leaders to work with more experienced educators and nurture their leadership skills.

#### Issue for Consideration 8

Establish a national body for regional, rural and remote principals and primary and secondary education leaders to provide a forum to support and develop regional, rural and remote leaders and educators.

### First Nations educator workforce

First Nations teachers play a central role as leaders within many regional, rural and remote communities. More than half of registered First Nations teachers work in regional, rural and remote schools.<sup>118</sup> In her 2023 Annual Report, the Commissioner highlighted the need to increase the number of First Nations teachers to build a sustainable and diverse educator workforce and provide a point of connection for First Nations students and a broader positive impact for the community.

At the Commissioner's initial First Nations Regional, Rural and Remote Education Roundtable held in September 2024, stakeholders emphasised the importance of a skilled, long-term and sustainable First Nations teaching workforce for First Nations schools and communities. Retaining teachers is a challenge across Australian schools, however it is acutely experienced in remote communities. While incentives may draw teachers to a remote community for a period of time, it can be disruptive to the students and other school staff with a constant turnover of new staff.

In order to assist retention of teaching staff from outside First Nations communities, stakeholders have raised that new teachers should be supported to gain an understanding of local culture and the important role of the community within the school. Ensuring that these teachers have clear expectations about their role, and time is invested to introduce and embed them in the community will improve the likelihood of these teachers staying for a longer period of time.

*'[At Menindee Central School], new teachers are not teaching class for their first week – they are driven around to meet with people and develop trust and rapport with the community.'*

Nathan Towney, Pro Vice Chancellor, Indigenous Strategy and Leadership  
Head of the Wollotuka Institute, University of Newcastle

118 Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, *In Focus: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teachers*, 2024.

## CASE STUDY: Menindee Central School

At Menindee Central School, induction for new school teachers prioritises quickly building genuine connections with students, staff, families and community members, and gaining a sense of belonging. Their place-based induction process involves the senior leader community engagement officer taking the new staff member around the community to meet the families of students and important community members and visit key cultural sites.<sup>119</sup> The success of Menindee Central School's approach, valuing community involvement and recognising the importance of relationship building for new staff members, was highlighted as good practice in the 2024 evaluation of the Connected Communities Strategy.<sup>120</sup>

As noted in the Commissioner's 2023 Annual Report, the Literacy and Numeracy Test for Initial Teacher Education (LANTITE) can act as a barrier for First Nations students pursuing a teacher qualification. The Commissioner welcomes changes to the LANTITE program standards in December 2023 that allows First Nations language speakers with high levels of First Nations language proficiency to have this recognised in lieu of the English language literacy and numeracy requirements.<sup>121</sup> These cultural language skills and expertise are greatly needed for teaching in remote communities.

First Nations teachers are able to better support First Nations students through cultural understanding, connection and even language, as for many students living in remote communities, English is not their first language. They are able to deliver a more relevant and responsive curriculum to First Nations students.

*'Kids in cities learn tree names from a science textbook. When you walk through the bush with the Elders, you learn the traditional names in three languages and teach the science in context.'*

Ian Perdrisat, Researcher, University of Newcastle, Director of Operations, Madjulla Inc.

<sup>119</sup> University of Newcastle, [A culturally responsive evaluation of the expanded Connected Communities Strategy](#), University of Newcastle, Commissioned by the Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (CESE), NSW Department of Education, 2024, p 67.

<sup>120</sup> University of Newcastle, *A culturally responsive evaluation of the expanded Connected Communities Strategy*, p 66.

<sup>121</sup> Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, [Addendum to the Accreditation of initial teacher education programs in Australia: Standards and Procedures](#), 2023, p 4.

A long-term sustainable teaching workforce in First Nations remote communities will come from strengthening the existing First Nations workforce in these schools and building on their existing capacity. Assistant teachers, Student Liaison Support Officers (SLSOs) and Elders have strong retention, even across generations of families in the school, and should be listened to and recognised for their cultural expertise.

To provide an alternative pathway for these essential First Nations support officers to qualify as a teacher, the Commissioner proposed in her 2023 Annual Report that a new classification of 'partner' teacher be created with different study and language prerequisites that responded to the unique requirements of teaching On Country. Creating a new classification could also provide a pathway for existing First Nations assistant teacher workforce to be elevated to 'partner' teachers due to their specialist cultural expertise.

**Issue for Consideration 6**

Elevate First Nations assistant teachers to 'partner' teachers as a reflection of the importance of their cultural knowledge and expertise, and to help create a sustainable workforce in First Nations communities.

# TERTIARY EDUCATION

Tertiary education can be lifechanging. Whether this is undertaking vocational education and training (VET) or higher education, tertiary education provides students with the opportunity to pursue and realise their ambitions, developing the skills and knowledge that they will utilise throughout their careers and lives. Tertiary education drives innovation and growth in our society, bolsters areas of workforce need, and increases overall prosperity. These opportunities and benefits cannot be limited by geography – and yet tertiary participation and attainment rates remain lower in regional, rural and remote areas than in metropolitan Australia.<sup>122</sup>

The current period of significant reform across the tertiary sector (see Appendix B for a list of reviews and reform activities across both VET and higher education) appears promising with its strong equity focus, and has the potential to help address persistent disparities in tertiary education outcomes between regional, rural and remote Australia and metropolitan areas.

The Australian Universities Accord presented significant reform opportunities for tertiary education in regional, rural and remote Australia, and the nation more broadly. The Commissioner notes the strong support and focus on regional education by the Accord Panel, of which she was a member, and the resultant chapter in the final report (Chapter 7 – Serving the regions through tertiary education) that comprehensively outlined the benefits of regional tertiary education, not only to local communities and their broader regions, but to Australia as a whole. The Accord final report echoed many of the issues and concerns raised by the Commissioner in her 2022 and 2023 Annual Reports with clear alignment between several of the Accord Recommendations and Commissioner's Issues for Consideration.

This chapter celebrates significant achievements and acknowledges actions underway to address the disparity in tertiary education outcomes between regional and metropolitan Australia, whilst also highlighting existing or emerging issues that still require attention.



*Image Caption: Regional Education Commissioner and the Vice Chancellor and CEO of the University of New England, Professor Chris Moran*

122 Australian Universities Accord Review Panel, [Australian Universities Accord Final Report](#), February 2024, pp 260–261.



## Aligning and Integrating the Vocational Education and Training (VET) and Higher Education Systems

As was recognised in the Commissioner's 2023 Annual Report, VET and higher education are 'parallel pathways to success' and should be treated as such. In this year's Annual Report, the deliberate inclusion of a single and integrated 'tertiary' chapter is reflective of the Commissioner's view that the VET and higher education systems should be recognised as equal but different tertiary options, and that both the perceived 'status' issues and system-related or 'technical' barriers between these systems should be broken down. One system is not 'better' than the other in enabling students to reach their potential through further education – they each quite rightly serve different purposes, and seamless movement between the two should be encouraged and supported.

It was positive to see the Accord final report, and the Government's response to it, acknowledging the importance of improving the integration between the VET and higher education sectors.<sup>123</sup> The Australian Government's White Paper on Jobs and Opportunities also reinforced that to build the highly skilled workforce needed, more collaboration is needed between higher education, the VET sector, industry and government.<sup>124</sup>

Achieving genuine integration between these sectors will require system level changes to ensure that where possible students are able to move smoothly between VET and higher education. Integration of these sectors would mean there are clear and accessible pathways between the two sectors, including streamlined admissions processes and standardised accreditation to enable greater credit recognition and portability of qualifications. A series of reforms to achieve these outcomes have been initiated including the National Skills Taxonomy and National Skills Passport (see Appendix B for further information on these programs).

In regional, rural and remote Australia there is a solid foundation and many connections already exist between VET and higher education to build upon. The Australian university sector has six dual-sector universities, including Charles Darwin University, Federation University and Central Queensland University in the regions, who already offer qualifications from both the VET and higher education systems. There are also many regional university and TAFE/RTO partnerships providing flexible pathways for students from VET into higher education.



*Image Caption: Regional Education Commissioner and the Committee for Gippsland visit Federation University  
L-R: Tony Cantwell, CEO Committee for Gippsland,  
Duncan Bentley Vice Chancellor, Federation University,  
the Hon Fiona Nash, Regional Education Commissioner,  
Sean Dignum, Chair, Committee for Gippsland, Leigh Kennedy,  
Head of Campus, Federation University and Committee for  
Gippsland Board Member*

<sup>123</sup> Australian Universities Accord Final Report, Recommendation 38, p 36.

<sup>124</sup> Australian Government, [Working Future: The Australian Government's White Paper on Jobs and Opportunities](#), September 2023, pp 216–217.

## CASE STUDY: CDU Alice Springs

The Alice Springs campus of Charles Darwin University delivers both VET and higher education courses that are developed in collaboration with local industry and aligned with local workforce needs.<sup>125</sup> The dual-sector campus has modern facilities including science labs, a clinical training lab for nursing, simulation space for paramedicine and specialist IT rooms. CDU's TAFE training facilities also include a state-of-the-art Trade Skills Centre. Importantly, the Alice Springs campus has a full range of student support services with culturally enriched and culturally safe learning environments for First Nations students. 'In June 2023, a record number of 80 First Nations students graduated in Alice Springs, totalling more than 20 per cent of the cohort that completed their studies at the Alice Springs campus.'<sup>126</sup>

## Improving the perceived status of VET

In regional, rural and remote Australia, VET is often a more accessible pathway for students that more closely aligns with their career goals. VET students from regional, rural and remote areas continue to make up a significant proportion of VET program enrolments.<sup>127</sup> This direct and accessible career pathway that VET courses provide, alongside its tangible links with local businesses and industries, is an aspect that should be encouraged and celebrated.

However, despite these positives, in many instances VET is treated as a secondary option to university – even in instances where it is more likely to align with the career interests and learning style of the student. A recent inquiry into the perceptions and status of VET outlined that 'VET is often perceived as less intellectually demanding and inferior to university, and as leading to lower paid, more physically demanding, and less stimulating employment'.<sup>128</sup> The inquiry identified that these negative perceptions were 'often driven by low levels of understanding of VET and VET-enabled careers, as well as by policy decisions and media representations which reinforce the belief that university education is necessary for personal and professional success'.<sup>129</sup> Such negative perceptions can filter into the VET trainer and assessor workforce as well, with prospective educators often dissuaded by a perceived lack of esteem or reward as compared to other fields.<sup>130</sup>

In order to develop a tertiary system that provides the best outcomes for all Australians, these perceptions must be improved and the differing strengths and purposes of VET and higher education must be instead acknowledged.

## Addressing the technical barriers to VET and higher education system integration

Alongside addressing the perception challenges between VET and higher education, changes need to be made to address the technical and administrative barriers between the two sectors. Students should, as much as possible, be able to move seamlessly between VET and higher education as best suits their needs, and collaboration between the two sectors should be encouraged.

<sup>125</sup> Charles Darwin University, [Alice Springs Courses](https://www.cdu.edu.au/courses), cdu.edu.au, accessed 22 October 2024.

<sup>126</sup> Charles Darwin University, [Annual Report: 2023 year in review](#), 30 June 2024, p 38.

<sup>127</sup> Jobs and Skills Australia, [Towards a Regional, Rural and Remote Jobs and Skills Roadmap: Interim Report](#), Australian Government, October 2024, pp 67–68.

<sup>128</sup> Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training, [Shared vision, equal pathways: Inquiry into the perceptions and status of vocational education and training](#), Parliament of Australia, February 2024, p xxxiii.

<sup>129</sup> Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training, [Shared vision, equal pathways](#), p xxxiii.

<sup>130</sup> Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training, [Shared vision, equal pathways](#), pp 122–124.



Feedback from employers to the Accord Panel highlighted the need for graduates with the 'right mix of skills'.<sup>131</sup> This not only includes technical and discipline-specific or specialist skills and knowledge, but also generic skills and capabilities, including teamwork and communication skills. Some of the barriers to achieving this outcome are 'structural' issues with the tertiary system, including rigidity of the Australian Qualifications Framework and lack of credit recognition for vocational skills.

For example, the difficulty of transitioning from VET to bachelor qualifications is a notable factor underlying the current skills shortages facing the early childhood education and care (ECEC) workforce. The recent Productivity Commission ECEC inquiry (see ECEC chapter of this report) acknowledged the need to reduce barriers for VET sector qualified educators to upskill to bachelor trained early childhood teachers. Currently, the time and administrative burden associated with moving from a VET Diploma to a university bachelor's course is discouraging ECEC educators from upskilling altogether. Recommendation 3.5 of the Inquiry encourages the federal, state and territory governments to work with universities and the ECEC sector to 'develop and promote accelerated degree programs through which Diploma-qualified educators can upskill to become Early Childhood Teachers'.<sup>132</sup>

Given the significance of VET as a pathway to skill development, rewarding careers and/or further study, closer integration of these two sectors will be of particular benefit for regional Australians. Successful integration and collaboration between these sectors will undoubtedly assist regional students through improved recognition of prior learning and portability of skills and knowledge acquired outside the higher education system. Additional benefits will also be delivered for regional communities if VET, higher education and industry are able to work together more easily to develop and deliver courses that cater to local and industry needs.

## Expanding access to tertiary education in the regions

Regional, rural and remote students are more likely to face challenges when moving into tertiary education than their metropolitan counterparts. This is reflected in tertiary participation and attainment rates that are progressively lower in regional, rural and remote areas than in metropolitan areas.<sup>133</sup> There are several factors underpinning this, but a significant one is access. Higher costs and increased distances are notable barriers that impact access to tertiary education for people in regional, rural and remote communities. These challenges are even more pronounced for First Nations people living in regional, rural and remote areas where living and learning On Country is especially important.

As a result of these barriers, alongside lower engagement in early childhood education, falling behind at school, and overall lower Year 12 completion rates, regional, rural and remote Australians often need additional pathways and supports to access both the VET and higher education systems to allow them the opportunity to reach their full potential.

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<sup>131</sup> Australian Universities Accord Final Report, p 82.

<sup>132</sup> Productivity Commission, *A path to universal early childhood education and care*, p 68.

<sup>133</sup> Australian Universities Accord Final Report, pp 260–261.

## Foundation Skills

Around one in five Australian adults have low literacy and/or numeracy skills.<sup>134</sup> In 2024, the Government launched a redesigned Foundation Skills program (Skills for Education and Employment). This program provides free language, literacy, numeracy and digital skills training with both general and First Nations delivery streams. The requirement to be a registered job seeker to gain access to this program has been removed, and all Australians aged over 15 years who have left school can benefit. The program can be completed via distance learning which is important for people in regional, rural and remote areas who do not have a provider nearby.<sup>135</sup>

### Commissioner's Note

The revamped Foundation Skills program provides a significant opportunity for people to gain the benefits of education they may have missed out on earlier in life. It is important that people who may benefit from the program, particularly those in regional, rural and remote areas where school completion and tertiary education attainment rates are lower than in the cities, are made aware of the program and encouraged to take it up.

## Enabling Programs

For many years, enabling programs have been opening the door to university study for students who may not have been able to meet the academic entry requirements and therefore have been unable to access university. The Accord final report described enabling programs (also known as preparatory or bridging courses) as 'one of the most important ways of increasing enrolments, particularly from underrepresented groups.'<sup>136</sup> These programs provide a pathway into higher education for students who need additional preparation and support to meet the entry requirements. There are many regional and metropolitan providers who already offer high-quality enabling programs and research shows that students who complete these courses do just as well in undergraduate study as other students.<sup>137</sup>

### CASE STUDY: University of Newcastle Open Foundation

Open Foundation was the first pathway program in Australia and celebrated its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year. The largest enabling program of its kind in Australia, Open Foundation has provided a successful pathway to higher education for tens of thousands of students.<sup>138</sup> Open Foundation provides guaranteed admission post-completion to over 40 degrees at the University of Newcastle. Students can select subjects of interest to their future degrees, whilst also learning foundation academic skills like research and communication. Importantly, students also receive personalised support and make connections with other students undertaking a similar pathway.

<sup>134</sup> OECD, *Building Skills for All in Australia: Policy Insights from the Survey of Adult Skills*, OECD Skills Studies, OECD Publishing, Paris, 2017, p 9.

<sup>135</sup> Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, *Foundation Skills*, [dewr.gov.au](https://dewr.gov.au), accessed 31 October 2024.

<sup>136</sup> Australian Universities Accord Final Report, p 3.

<sup>137</sup> Hattam S, Davis C and Weiler T, *What are enabling programs? How do they help Australians get to uni?*, *The Conversation*, 26 July 2023.

<sup>138</sup> University of Newcastle, *Pathways: Open Foundation*, [newcastle.edu.au](https://newcastle.edu.au), accessed 10 October 2024.

The Commissioner welcomes the additional \$350 million investment in Commonwealth Grant Scheme funding over four years to expand the availability of FEE-FREE Uni-Ready courses that will help build the skills, experience and confidence of students preparing to undertake tertiary study<sup>139</sup> This additional funding will allow regional students who have had a disrupted education pathway, those who could not access the necessary prerequisite subjects at school, or those who need additional support to build their confidence before undertaking higher education, a clear path into university study.

## Regional University Study Hubs

One of the success stories in enhancing access to tertiary education for people living in regional, rural and remote communities is the establishment and expansion of the Regional University Study Hubs (RUSH) program. From their inception in Geraldton and Cooma, there are now 46 RUSHs funded across regional, rural and remote Australia with up to 10 additional RUSHs to be established in the 'Cohort 5' funding round.<sup>140</sup> RUSHs enable students to remain and study in their local community and provide access to facilities, study spaces and academic and pastoral support services. The RUSHs also foster a sense of campus-style community for local students studying any course with any tertiary provider.

Evidence of the positive impact of these facilities continues to build. From personal anecdotes to formal evaluation activities, the message is the same, these community-led and operated facilities are providing enhanced access to tertiary education and supporting local students to succeed. The Pilbara Kimberley University Centres (PKUC) celebrated 50 regional, rural and remote students who completed their qualifications in 2024, ranging from Certificate IVs to master's degrees.<sup>141</sup>

Importantly, these graduates are working in essential roles as health professionals, educators and industry specialists in the Pilbara. This is an excellent example of a successfully 'homegrown' workforce.

*'We are partnering with universities, RTOs, and local industry stakeholders to deliver courses which will upskill existing workforces and address regional skills shortages. PKUC's commitment to the equity of access to education in the regions is critical to ensuring remoteness does not equal disadvantage.'*<sup>142</sup>

Susan Grylls, CEO, Pilbara Kimberley Universities Centre

An independent evaluation of the Country Universities Centre (CUC) program in New South Wales was conducted in 2024 with the evaluators concluding that CUCs are 'well-utilised and supporting students to reach their higher education goals'.<sup>143</sup>

139 Department of Education, [Commonwealth Grant Scheme \(CGS\)](#), education.gov.au, accessed 1 November 2024.

140 Department of Education, [Regional University Study Hubs – 2024 Application Round](#), education.gov.au, accessed 29 October 2024.

141 Pilbara Kimberley University Centres, [2024 Graduation Celebration](#), 12 September 2024.

142 Pilbara Kimberley University Centres, [2024 Graduation Celebration](#).

143 Blunden H, Hoenig J, Tani M, Baker S and Beswick K, [Country Universities Centre Program Evaluation: Final Report](#), UNSW Social Policy Research Centre, February 2024, p 9.

*'CUCs also respond to many of the intersecting educational challenges that students in country NSW face, such as remoteness, poor connectivity, a lack of informed support and advocacy, by providing quiet and safe spaces seven days per week from morning to night, free food and drink, dedicated support staff, and facilitating a network of students within a local community.'*<sup>144</sup>

Country Universities Centre Program Evaluation: Final Report

### **Enhancing the RUSH program**

The Commissioner was invited by the Department of Education to provide input into the Application Guide for Cohort 5 of the RUSH program. Prior to this round, universities have been ineligible to apply for funding to establish a RUSH. Cohort 5 included a change to allow universities to work with communities and apply for funding under this program, which as indicated in the Application Guide if successful would be a trial. Importantly, the guidelines reinforced that university applicants would be required to demonstrate that the RUSH would be 'community-embedded and driven by local student and community needs.'<sup>145</sup>

In enhancing the RUSH program, as identified in the Commissioner's 2023 report (Issue for Consideration 13), there may be opportunities to further expand the use of existing infrastructure and co-locating with local education providers. The Commissioner has heard from stakeholders that some regional, rural and remote communities have education infrastructure, such as TAFE facilities, that is currently underutilised and could be cost-effective to repurpose.

### **Secondary students access to RUSH facilities**

A further opportunity for expanding the impact of this program in each community is consideration of access to RUSHs by secondary students. At the Commissioner's request, the department undertook an informal survey of RUSHs in 2024 to determine whether existing RUSHs are being utilised by secondary school students. Based on the surveys completed, RUSHs are already supporting approximately 150 secondary school students to undertake their school studies as well as preparatory courses for university.

Stakeholders have discussed with the Commissioner potential models for supporting secondary students in RUSHs, acknowledging these may differ based on local context such as the population size and presence of other educational facilities within the community. The Commissioner acknowledges this program sits under the *Higher Education Support Act 2003*; however, stakeholders have raised that there is opportunity for RUSHs to also provide support to secondary students, and also potentially improve future tertiary education opportunities for these students.

In very remote locations, where no secondary schooling is available locally, the RUSH could provide wraparound support and a place for distance education students to work together with peers. It might also be possible for higher education students studying Education, Health or Social Work degrees to provide some of this support as part of their university placement requirements. In small communities where a secondary school is present, but the Year 11 and 12 subjects offered are limited, the RUSH could support single-subject distance education. In all communities, the RUSHs can continue, or expand their activities, to work with secondary school students to undertake university pathway programs or work more broadly on programs to nurture the aspiration and build the confidence of school students.

<sup>144</sup> Blunden H et al., *Country Universities Centre Program Evaluation*, pp 79–80.

<sup>145</sup> Department of Education, [Application Guide 2024 \(Cohort 5\) Regional University Study Hubs Program](#), 21 August 2024, p 16.

Where the opportunities exist, and these are supported by the community, the expansion of RUSH support for secondary students to access their facilities could have significant advantages in terms of enhanced utilisation of existing infrastructure and nurturing aspiration for tertiary study whilst students are at school.

*‘...any approach to supporting students is based on community defined need. In the context of school aged student support, any offering will be complimentary and not competitive or intended to substitute what already exists within the community.’*

Duncan Taylor, Founder, Country Universities Centre

### **Maintaining the quality of services and supporting RUSHs**

The Commissioner welcomes the expansion of RUSH facilities across regional, rural and remote Australia and is committed to encouraging further investment in this program. Feedback from stakeholders and evaluation activities showcase the high-quality of services currently provided by these community-led facilities. However, considering the rapid growth of the program, and to ensure quality is maintained into the future, the Commissioner supports the development and implementation of a framework to ensure ongoing quality, support and governance oversight for all RUSHs.

#### **Issue for Consideration 11**

Continue to enhance and expand the Regional University Study Hubs program by exploring options including, but not limited to:

- collaborating with local communities to identify opportunities to improve education outcomes for regional, rural and remote people through support for secondary students that is tailored to the education needs of each community
- developing an appropriate framework to deliver ongoing support and governance oversight for the full network of Regional University Study Hubs to maintain the high quality of delivery
- collaborating with state and territory governments to identify further opportunities to house Regional University Study Hubs on existing TAFE sites.

### **On Country tertiary education**

The Commissioner heard from First Nations stakeholders about the importance of providing opportunities for First Nations students to remain On Country to complete their tertiary education. The Garrthlala Bush University Study Hub in North East Arnhem Land, and the Wuyagiba Regional Study Hub in South East Arnhem Land (both RUSHs), are positive examples that provide the opportunity for First Nations students to remain On Country and access the facilities and support services to assist their tertiary study.

Following the First Nations Regional, Rural and Remote Education Roundtable, the Commissioner met with a team of First Nations education and industry leaders and university representatives to discuss a proposal for On Country nursing education in a remote community. Through a pilot program, the proposal aims to trial an innovative model that emphasises local First Nations knowledge and cultural protocols and educates First Nations students where they live for rewarding careers as nursing and health professionals On Country.

Importantly, through providing education and training opportunities On Country, the community would be able to 'homegrow' a local nursing workforce and greatly assist with persistent workforce shortages whilst also understanding the local cultural nuances that impact on the sector.

Critical to the success of this pilot is the ground up and community-led approach to generating ideas and designing the solutions. Another important element is ensuring that the university partner has developed successful and sustainable partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and has a history of achievement and innovation in supporting First Nations students to access and succeed in tertiary education.

*'Aboriginal people want education to provide them with the knowledge and skills to live life in safety and with dignity. To embrace, through language and knowledge systems, the teachings embedded in Country. To heed the lessons derived from timeless song-lines, oral traditions and cultures. To know, appreciate and celebrate the interconnected symmetry of all creation and the teachings that have sustained Aboriginal peoples since the beginning of time.'*

Professor Bob Morgan AO

Chair, Board of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Education and Research (BATSIER)

Conjoint Professor, Wollotuka Institute, University of Newcastle

#### Issue for Consideration 12

In collaboration with a remote First Nations community, design and pilot an innovative program to support First Nations students to complete their nursing education On Country.

## Supporting regional students to succeed

Foundation skills and enabling programs, and Regional University Study Hubs, are excellent examples that have improved, and will continue to improve, access to tertiary education for people in the regions. However, for many regional, rural and remote students there remain significant challenges in seeing their VET or higher education qualification through to completion. Over recent years, the financial challenges faced by regional, rural and remote students undertaking tertiary education have escalated, not eased.

Based on 2023 non-completion interviews, two-thirds of students who withdrew from their studies at Charles Sturt University cited financial, employment and caring issues as the reasons.<sup>146</sup>

<sup>146</sup> Brown G, [Addressing the drop-out rate of regional university students requires a more coordinated approach](#), CSU News, 22 July 2024.

*'The problem regional students face is not with the quality of education delivered by regional universities but with the unique economic challenges they face as regional students. Very often, regional students are the first in their family to attend university, and/or are from lower socioeconomic groups, and/or don't have the luxury of full-time study with family support. Yet income support payments for students are below the poverty line and means-tested out by even modest parental incomes.'*<sup>147</sup>

Professor Graham Brown, DVC-Academic, Charles Sturt University

## Financial Support

Regional, rural and remote students are twice as likely as metropolitan students to need to relocate for higher education. These additional financial costs contribute to fewer regional and remote students commencing and completing tertiary study.<sup>148</sup> Given the immense social and economic benefits of tertiary education, and the Government's aspirational tertiary attainment target adopted from the Accord final report, we need to attract significantly more regional, rural and remote people into tertiary education and support them to complete their qualifications. To achieve this, we must address the significant financial hurdles faced by students in regional, rural and remote Australia.

### ***Independent Youth Allowance for students from regional, remote and very remote areas***

Realistically, students in regional, rural and remote areas who have no choice but to relocate for tertiary study become 'independent' the moment they leave home. However, currently students from regional, remote and very remote areas must demonstrate independence and qualify for independent youth allowance through having worked at least 15 hours a week for a minimum of two years or earned 75 per cent or more of wage Level A of the National Training Wage Schedule over a 14-month period.<sup>149</sup>

The Commissioner continues to support the approach outlined in the Napthine review, whereby students who have no choice but to relocate from a regional, rural or remote area are automatically considered independent.<sup>150</sup> The Accord final report noted that 'it is timely for the Australian Government to examine student payments.'<sup>151</sup>

*'The specific challenges regional, rural and remote students face in accessing higher education, and the extent to which the student income support system is doing enough to reduce these barriers, warrants further consideration.'*<sup>152</sup>

Australian Universities Accord final report

<sup>147</sup> Brown G, [Addressing the drop-out rate of regional university students requires a more coordinated approach](#), CSU News, 22 July 2024.

<sup>148</sup> Napthine D, [National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy: Final Report](#), Department of Education, 19 August 2019, p 24.

<sup>149</sup> Department of Social Services, [Youth allowance concessional workforce independence criteria for regional students](#), Social Security Guide, Version 1.322, 4 November 2024.

<sup>150</sup> Napthine D, *National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy*, p 46.

<sup>151</sup> *Australian Universities Accord Final Report*, p 145.

<sup>152</sup> *Australian Universities Accord Final Report*, p 145.

### Issue for Consideration 13

Expand access to, and boost attainment of, tertiary education qualifications for people from regional, rural and remote areas, by undertaking a review of the regional, rural and remote Independent Youth Allowance eligibility criteria and making necessary adjustments to ensure that regional, rural and remote students who have no choice but to relocate for tertiary study are financially supported to do so.

### *Tertiary Access Payment*

In her 2023 Annual Report, the Commissioner raised the limitations of the Tertiary Access Payment (TAP) and put forward suggestions to enable this program to better support students from regional, rural and remote areas (2023 Issue for Consideration 10). The issues raised by the Commissioner, including the timing of the TAP and the restriction that students are ineligible to apply if they take a gap year, were also flagged in the Accord final report (Recommendation 39d).<sup>153</sup> However, eligibility for, and administration of, this program remains unchanged.

Students from regional, rural and remote areas are more likely to take gap year/s than those living in metropolitan areas.<sup>154</sup> Given the significant cost of relocation and living away from home, regional, rural and remote students often use the gap year/s to prepare financially for tertiary study, gain work experience, and/or to qualify as independent through work to receive Independent Youth Allowance.<sup>155</sup>

The Commissioner continues to strongly advocate for removal of the 'no gap year' eligibility requirement to ensure greater access to financial support for regional, rural and remote students who need to relocate for tertiary study. Importantly, analysis of higher education data shows little difference in 6-year completion rates for students who have taken a gap year compared to those who commenced university study immediately after leaving school.<sup>156</sup>

Regarding the timing of the payment, the Commissioner has heard concerns that making this payment to students prior to the census date may result in payments being made to school leavers who subsequently change their mind and do not enrol in tertiary study, or who no longer need to relocate to undertake their study.

The Commissioner acknowledges these concerns but maintains that for this program to meet the policy intent of improving access to tertiary education for regional, rural and remote students by covering upfront expenses like relocation costs, then students need to be paid at the time these expenses are incurred.

However, if it is determined that it is not possible, students at least need assurance prior to their relocation that the payment will be provided to them following confirmation of enrolment after census date, all eligibility requirements having been fulfilled.

Under the current assessment process, the letter sent to students once they have applied for the TAP does not clearly communicate that they have fulfilled all eligibility requirements except for their confirmation of enrolment, which cannot be provided until after the census date.

<sup>153</sup> Australian Universities Accord Final Report, pp 266-267, 275.

<sup>154</sup> Department of Education, Skills and Employment, [Factors affecting Higher Education Completions – Gap-years](#), education.gov.au, 2020, p 2.

<sup>155</sup> D Napthine, *National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy*, p 24.

<sup>156</sup> Department of Education, Skills and Employment, *Factors affecting Higher Education Completions – Gap-years*, 2020, p1. Note: completion rates were controlled for potentially compounding variables.



Simple changes to the language of the notification so that students know upfront that they will receive the payment once they have provided the confirmation of enrolment after census date, would give them reassurance at the time they incur relocation costs that they will be reimbursed.

#### Issue for Consideration 14

Improve uptake of the Tertiary Access Payment (TAP) by:

- removing the 'no gap year' requirement
- providing students with the financial support, or at least confirmation that the payment will be made upon verification of their tertiary study enrolment after the census date, prior to relocation rather than after they commence their studies.

### Commonwealth Prac Payment

The Commissioner welcomes, as a positive step in addressing the financial barriers to completing tertiary students for regional, rural and remote students, the proposed introduction of the Commonwealth Prac Payment (CPP). Over 40 per cent of domestic students at Regional Universities Network (RUN) member universities are studying degrees in health and education, which require many hours of compulsory, and currently unpaid, placements.<sup>157</sup> The Commissioner, through her own stakeholders and as a member of the Accord Panel, heard firsthand of the significant impact of financial stress during unpaid placements, especially for students currently underrepresented in tertiary education.

From 1 July 2025, \$427.4 million is proposed to be invested over the next four years to introduce the CPP for higher education students enrolled in eligible Bachelor or Master's of teaching, nursing and midwifery, and social work qualifications, and VET students studying a Diploma of Nursing, as they undertake mandatory placements.<sup>158</sup> The Commissioner is also aware that there are other professions with significant placement commitments, where there are persistent workforce shortages in regional, rural and remote Australia, that should be considered for potential expansion of the program in the future.

### Support for apprentices

This year the Commissioner engaged in the Strategic Review of the Australian Apprenticeships Incentive System through a written submission, and subsequent invitation to a roundtable of regional stakeholders to discuss the issues and solutions specific to the needs of apprentices in regional, rural and remote Australia. The review heard that cost-of-living pressures are making apprenticeships less attractive for prospective apprentices and reducing retention and completion rates. These issues were especially pressing in regional and remote areas, where distance and the need to travel (or relocate) to access on and off the job training can leave apprentices facing extreme cost of living pressures.<sup>159</sup>

<sup>157</sup> Department of Education, [Selected Higher Education Statistics – 2023 student data](#), Table 2.9, education.gov.au, accessed 30 October 2024.

<sup>158</sup> Department of Education, [Introduction of a new Commonwealth Prac Payment, Budget Papers 2024-25](#), 14 May 2024.

<sup>159</sup> Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia, [Submission to the Strategic Review of the Australian Apprenticeships Incentives System](#), May 2024, pp 8–9.

The incentives and provisions for apprentices and trainees, such as the Commonwealth Living Away from Home Allowance (LAFHA) do not reflect the real cost of living and the gap between financial assistance, and the actual cost borne by rural and remote apprentices living away from home is substantial and continues to widen.

Despite facing similar financial costs to tertiary students in relocating as part of their VET or higher education pathway, apprentices are not currently eligible to receive the Tertiary Access Payment (TAP). In line with the Isolated Children's Parents' Association, the Commissioner encourages the Australian Government to consider expansion of the TAP to apprentices who must relocate from their place of residence to undertake their apprenticeship.<sup>160</sup>

#### **Issue for Consideration 15**

Extend the eligibility for the Tertiary Access Payment (TAP) to include regional, rural and remote Australian Apprentices who must relocate from their place of residence to undertake their apprenticeship.

## **Funding for higher education in the regions**

As acknowledged in the ECEC and Schools chapters, the cost of delivering high-quality education in regional, rural and remote areas is significantly higher than in the cities. At the time of writing this report, consultation on proposed reforms to higher education funding was still occurring. The needs-based funding proposal signals an intent by the Australian Government to increase funding for universities with regional students studying at regional campuses. This acknowledges the higher cost of delivery in the regions.

### **Managed Growth Funding**

The Commissioner is supportive of the intent to provide funding clarity and stability for higher education providers – this is particularly important for regional universities who do not have significant funding reserves and have less capacity to cope with sudden funding adjustments.

However, the model proposed in the department's Managed Growth Funding System post-Budget implementation consultation paper suggests application of 'hard caps' to all universities; including those who enrol significant cohorts of underrepresented students.<sup>161</sup> In light of the need to significantly increase the number of tertiary students from regional, rural and remote areas, the Commissioner believes hard caps should not be applied to regional universities.

Although it has been put forward that universities will be able to negotiate additional 'managed demand-driven' places with the proposed Australian Tertiary Education Commission (ATEC), there is a risk that regional students will be turned away from their local or preferred institution or that delays from negotiating additional places will deter students from undertaking tertiary study. Regional universities already do the 'heavy lifting' by enrolling and supporting a high proportion of underrepresented students and prospective students from these cohorts do not need any additional barriers, real or perceived, to getting a place at their local university.

<sup>160</sup> Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia, [Progress Report: 2023 Federal Conference Motions – Training Portfolio](#), March 2024, p 1.

<sup>161</sup> Department of Education, [Managed Growth Funding System Implementation Consultation Paper](#), 17 June 2024, p 2.

## Needs-based funding

Needs-based funding (NBF) presents a significant opportunity to boost tertiary education participation and attainment for groups traditionally underrepresented in higher education, provided that the 'true cost' of supporting these students to succeed is captured and that the money is directed towards activities to facilitate their success.

The Accord final report, and subsequent department NBF post-Budget implementation consultation paper, acknowledge the cumulative and compounding effects of disadvantage for students who belong to multiple target cohorts.<sup>162</sup> The identified target cohorts include students from low SES backgrounds, First Nations students, students with disability and students studying at regional campuses.

The Commissioner supports a new funding system that accounts for compounding disadvantage and provides adequate support for all regional Australians to reach their full potential through tertiary education. Again, at the time of writing this report, stakeholder consultation was still occurring regarding the details of the needs-based funding system.

In her feedback to the department, the Commissioner proposed separating the regional loading component from the NBF model and instead suggested providing a 'core regional grant' to eligible providers. The 'regional' component of the NBF acknowledges the higher costs regional providers face to deliver courses and undertake world class research; however, funding based on student load does not acknowledge the challenges of operating in areas of lower population density (i.e. thin markets).

The NBF model proposed in the consultation paper also did not consider the breadth of costs, other than student teaching and support, relating to areas, such as building and maintaining physical and digital infrastructure, which sit at greater cost with regionally located universities as compared to metropolitan universities. Regional universities remain under significant pressure to continue to offer face-to-face learning for students in low enrolment courses – which is often unsustainable unless additional financial support is provided.

## Regional university infrastructure funding

There is no disputing the enormous contribution regional universities make to their local communities, both socially and economically. Regional universities are not only places where teaching, learning and research is undertaken, but the facilities are often used for community events and support, and are critical hubs in times of need.

However, in the absence of dedicated funding streams for critical physical and digital infrastructure, these regional providers face significant challenges building or maintaining contemporary facilities for teaching and learning, research and broader community use. Many regional universities do not have the economy of scale to fund their infrastructure requirements within their current budgets and need additional infrastructure funding, in part in recognition of the significant public good they provide.

The Commissioner supports a proposal raised by stakeholders that an audit of regional universities' critical physical and digital infrastructure be undertaken to establish in detail the scale of the issue and to make recommendations in terms of the 'upfront' investment, and the quantum of a regional infrastructure fund be determined.

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162 Department of Education, [Needs-Based Funding Implementation Consultation Paper](#), 11 July 2024, pp 3–4.

**Issue for Consideration 16**

Undertake an audit of regional universities' physical and digital infrastructure to determine the scale of the investment needed to ensure regional universities have the facilities to support tertiary education access and attainment, whilst also enabling the universities' social and economic contribution to their local communities.

**Australian Tertiary Education Commission**

There is no doubt that the future prosperity of Australia's regions is dependent on boosting tertiary attainment rates for regional people. However, given falling domestic enrolments in higher education, a significant shift in tertiary participation and attainment will not be achieved quickly and a long-term strategic plan is needed.

The Accord final report has provided such a plan and recommended establishment of an ATEC to steward the tertiary sector into the future. The Commissioner welcomes the establishment of a body responsible for long-term strategic planning for the entire tertiary sector and the establishment of targets for individual equity cohorts including regional, rural and remote.

At the time of writing this report, the department was consulting with the sector and stakeholders on potential models for the ATEC. If established, the Regional Education Commissioner could play a key role in ensuring the ATEC considers the impact of future policy decisions on regional, rural and remote students and providers.

**International education in the regions**

In 2024 the Commissioner heard concerns from many regional universities about the impact of uncertain and changing policies in international education. Due to the financial pressures faced by many regional universities, the international education market is particularly important to diversify and increase their revenue.

Despite the regions being home to almost one-third of the Australian population and featuring regional universities with impressive graduate employment outcomes,<sup>163</sup> just three and a half per cent of onshore international students attend a regional campus.<sup>164</sup>

163 Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching, [2023 Graduate Outcomes Survey National Report](#), May 2024, p 19.

164 Regional Universities Network, [Submission: Education Services for Overseas Students Amendment \(Quality and Integrity\) Bill 2024](#), 1 July 2024, p 4.

## Changes to visa processing and migration settings

Changes to visa processing for international students, coupled with an increase in the cost of Australian student visa fees had a disproportionate effect on international student enrolments at regional universities in 2024. In December 2023, subsequent to the release of the Migration Strategy<sup>165</sup>, the Department of Home Affairs implemented Ministerial Direction 107.<sup>166</sup> These changes predominantly favoured the larger metropolitan universities who tend to enrol international students from wealthier/ 'low risk' regions, and have negatively impacted student visa processing timeframes for smaller and regional providers who tend to enrol more students from higher risk regions.<sup>167</sup> The drop in revenue caused by these changes resulted in significant negative outcomes for regional universities and their communities.

## Draft International Education and Skills Strategic Framework

Concerns were raised with the Commissioner during the consultation period for the draft International Education and Skills Strategic Framework, released on 11 May 2024. Stakeholders have indicated that the removal of Ministerial Direction 107 would have a positive impact for regional universities. However, concerns remain about the ability for regional universities to undertake mid to longer-term planning given the uncertainty around international student caps and the ability to grow international student load (to at least pre-COVID enrolments for some institutions).

### *International students and the regional workforce*

Although most international students return home when they finish their study, the Commissioner heard from several stakeholders about the opportunity for international students who have trained in areas of skills shortages to remain in regional Australia as valued members of the community and workforce. As is often the case, policy makers must consider the local context and devise solutions that take this into account. For example, Charles Darwin University operates in a unique context, informed by the Northern Territory's skills shortages and as such have argued for a distinct social licence for international education.

*'One of the biggest draws for international students is access to jobs. International students have more opportunities to enter the local workforce after studying at a regional university.'*<sup>168</sup>

Professor Scott Bowman AO, Vice-Chancellor and President, Charles Darwin University

<sup>165</sup> Department of Home Affairs, [Migration Strategy](#), 11 December 2023, pp 63–65.

<sup>166</sup> Ministerial Direction 107 applies risk-based visa processing of Subclass 500 (Student) visa applications and Student Guardian visa applications. Under Ministerial Direction 107, visa processing is prioritised according to provider level risk, as assessed by the provider's evidence level (EL) under the Simplified Student Visa Framework (SSVF).

<sup>167</sup> Secombe M, [Inside Labor's decision on student caps](#), *The Saturday Paper*, 5 October 2024.

<sup>168</sup> Charles Darwin University, [CDU to strengthen ties with South Asian partners after international cap assurances](#), 11 September 2024.

## Tertiary educator workforce

As is the case for teachers in early childhood and schools, VET sector educators play a critical role in supporting students on their pathway to fulfilling careers and they must be valued and rewarded. However, the Commissioner has continued to hear that access to qualified educators is the most significant barrier in providing VET to regional students.

Attracting and retaining VET sector trainers and assessors in regional Australia is challenging, particularly in remote or very remote areas. With high levels of industry demand, compounded by ongoing skills shortages, many trainers are 'back on the tools' for more competitive pay.<sup>169</sup> When compared to higher paying industry roles there are few incentives to remain as a VET educator. This is particularly pressing in remote contexts where cost of delivery is higher, and access to essential services like health and childcare is likely to be lower.

Just as for teachers and early childhood educators, incentives and subsidies for VET trainers who relocate to or remain in regional communities should be considered. Any form of incentive program to support regional VET trainers must appropriately recognise the additional costs and distance barriers that are faced in the regions, and the way in which these increase with remoteness. As was raised in the Queensland Parliamentary Committee report into the delivery of VET in regional, rural and remote Queensland, country loading categories for state subsidies do not accurately account for the significance of distance between outer regional, remote and very remote areas.<sup>170</sup> Without a more granular understanding of the costs involved with delivering training in remote areas, many trainers are left unwilling to put in the additional effort and travel time to deliver in remote contexts when a job in an inner regional community would receive the same incentives.<sup>171</sup>

Aside from incentives and supports, one of the major issues underpinning the VET trainer and assessor workforce shortage is the barrier of qualification and compliance requirements. All VET educators are currently required to complete a Certificate IV in Training and Assessment (TAE) or higher equivalent qualification in order to deliver recognised training. This qualification takes six months to two years to complete depending on the mode of delivery and study load taken. Feedback provided to the New South Wales VET Review highlighted that the TAE was viewed as overly rigid, complex and time-consuming, ultimately affecting completion rates. Despite updates to TAE implemented in 2022, aimed at supporting flexibility, its adoption remains limited.<sup>172</sup>

The Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry has suggested that 'for the near future trainer and assessor courses should be permanently fee-free and there should be simplified qualification pathways for experienced practitioners'. They also suggested that 'supporting workforce development through mentorship programs, professional development opportunities and professional networks is vital to ensuring the ongoing quality of teaching and training in the VET sector'.<sup>173</sup>

169 Independent Tertiary Education Council Australia, [RTO Workforce Challenges Addressed by Sector Leaders](#), 24 July 2024.

170 Education, Employment, Training and Skills Committee, [The Delivery of VET in regional, rural and remote Queensland](#), Report No. 43, Parliament of Queensland, February 2024, pp 34–38.

171 Education, Employment, Training and Skills Committee, [The Delivery of VET in regional, rural and remote Queensland](#), pp 31–33.

172 Bruniges M, Ardler J and Firth V, [NSW VET Review: Final Report](#), NSW Government, June 2024, p 73.

173 Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, [Submission to the Strategic Review of the Australian Apprenticeship Incentive System](#), 24 April 2024, p 15.

### CASE STUDY: VET Trainer Career Pathway Pilot Program

A collaboration between the Victorian State Government and WorkSafe Australia, this pilot program supports industry professionals recovering from a work-related injury to move from their rehabilitation into a 9-month qualification to allow them to reskill as a VET trainer. The program provides a tailored pathway that allows professionals to use their specialist knowledge and skills in a new context, and to bolster the VET educator workforce in doing so.<sup>174</sup>

#### Commissioner's Note

Current VET trainer qualifications need to be more flexible and accessible, with simplified structures and better recognition of prior industry experience; acknowledging that this flexibility must be balanced with the need to ensure educator quality and competency – especially in highly technical roles.

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174 Carroll B, [Helping Injured Tradies Upskilled as Vocational Trainers \(Media Release\)](#), Victoria State Government, 12 August 2024.

# EDUCATING A WORKFORCE FOR THE REGIONS



Education is central to the future of our regions. The opportunities that education provides – the development of skills and knowledge, access to qualifications and career pathways, the nurturing of aspiration and confidence – bring benefits to not only individuals but their families, communities, regions and indeed Australia as a whole.

It is anticipated that over the next decade more than 90 per cent of new jobs will need post-secondary qualifications.<sup>175</sup> More immediately, many of the sectors facing significant skills shortages are in need of a tertiary educated workforce. However, with weakening domestic enrolments across the sector, greater emphasis needs to be placed on encouraging people from underrepresented groups to undertake tertiary education.<sup>176</sup> Simply put, it does not matter how many tertiary places are available if we do not have the regional students interested in taking them up and to grow a strong workforce in regional, rural and remote Australia.

## Nurturing aspiration and building confidence

Significant improvements in tertiary education attainment, and the future workforce outcomes that come with it, will not be achieved without nurturing the aspiration and building the confidence of regional students. The Commissioner regularly hears that regional, rural and remote students have high aspirations, however what they might not have is the confidence or knowledge to take the next step to work towards them. Two areas of focus that can collectively nurture this aspiration and build student confidence are careers advice and outreach activities.

*'You can't build competence, without building confidence.'*

Professor Anne Poelina, Chair Indigenous Knowledges & Senior Research Fellow,  
Nulungu Research Institute, University of Notre Dame

## Access to high-quality careers advice in the regions

Providing high-quality careers advice to students as early as possible, from primary school onwards, is critical to help regional, rural and remote students understand options for their future pathways, and to nurture their aspirations.

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175 Jobs and Skills Australia, [Annual Jobs and Skills Report 2023](#), p 18.

176 Department of Education, [Key findings from the 2023 Higher Education Student Statistics](#), education.gov.au, accessed 30 October 2024.



The Commissioner continues to hear that access to high-quality careers information and guidance is not uniform across regional, rural and remote areas. At the moment, 'career education is not mandated by the Australian Curriculum, so states and territories develop their own strategies, programs and services for students, school-leavers and non-school cohorts.'<sup>177</sup> This year, the Commissioner saw firsthand a regional community taking the lead in providing students with opportunities to learn more about potential careers and build their confidence through excursions and industry experiences.

### CASE STUDY: CanDo – Imagine Your Future

In Narrabri, a number of school, community, local industry and tertiary education providers have established the CanDO – Imagine Your Future committee. These stakeholders are working together to increase skilled workers in the area by offering opportunities to local students and workers in the area through purposeful and supported pathways. Collaborators include Narrabri High School, Wee Waa High School, Councillor Darrell Tiemens Mayor of Narrabri Shire, Narrabri Shire Council, the University of New England, TAFE NSW, TAFE QLD, Careers Network, Axial Training, Country Universities Centre North West, Narrabri Industrial Network and the local mines.<sup>178</sup>

As part of this work, secondary school students attend worksites to learn more about local careers. In September, the Commissioner attended Mines Rescue Gunnedah for a demonstration of their new training facility and to explore their Virtual Reality technology as part of the Health Careers Highlights Immersion Program.

*Image Caption: Health Careers Highlights Immersion Program, Regional Education Commissioner trialling a Virtual Reality demonstration at Mines Rescue Gunnedah*



For students in regional, rural and remote areas that may not have access to information about a broad range of careers, or indeed who do not have the opportunity to see or experience the full breadth of career options available within or beyond their community, online tools and programs can be a valuable source to address this gap.

<sup>177</sup> Australian Universities Accord Final Report, p 125.

<sup>178</sup> Narrabri High School, [Careers Preparation – Business, Industry and Agriculture leaders gather to support NHS](#), 9 September 2024.

## CASE STUDY: Year13

Year13 is an online platform that supports over 1.6 million students annually with career planning, school to work transition, and overall wellbeing. Their digital tools, including career quizzes, online learning modules, careers hub, course finder and articles, help students make more informed decisions about their future and bridge the gap between young people and brands, educators, employers, travel providers and Government.<sup>179</sup> Building on their success in Australia, in 2024 Year13 has begun an expansion to the USA, launching in Texas and North Carolina with a particular focus on working with local councils and communities.

Improving the delivery of careers advice to students has been a key focus of recent reviews of the school and tertiary systems. The Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System recommended career education for every student to successfully transition to further education, training or employment.<sup>180</sup> The Accord final report similarly recommended 'building aspiration including through increasing readiness for tertiary education and providing career advice'.<sup>181</sup> One of the actions recommended by the Accord Panel included development of 'a consistent national framework for careers advice across all life stages'.<sup>182</sup>

*'Often, the study decisions that students make in Years 9 and 10 of secondary education define how well prepared they are for future tertiary study. This highlights the need to improve careers advice, particularly at younger ages.'*<sup>183</sup>

Australian Universities Accord final report

As noted in the Accord final report, career guidance is delivered by many stakeholders including schools, universities, registered training organisations, TAFEs, employers, employment services, industry organisations, private career advisers, state and territory governments, and the Australian Government's National Careers Institute.<sup>184</sup>

Given the diversity of stakeholders and lack of standardisation through the national curriculum, the Commissioner highlights the Accord final report recommendation for a national framework for careers advice. A national framework would ensure a minimum and consistent standard of delivery of careers advice for all students.

However, a preceding step to the development of a national framework, that the Commissioner raised in her 2022 and 2023 Annual Reports, is a nationwide comprehensive assessment of the accessibility, effectiveness and quality of current careers advice delivery. Although the anecdotal evidence strongly points towards careers advice not currently meeting the needs of students and career changers, a comprehensive assessment which includes not only access to careers advice, but also the quality of careers advice given to students has not been undertaken. This assessment would also be useful in identifying good practices that already exist across regional, rural and remote areas; and using these to inform the national framework.

<sup>179</sup> Year 13, [year13.com.au](https://year13.com.au), accessed 26 November 2024.

<sup>180</sup> Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Schools Agreement, [Improving Outcomes for All: The Report of the Independent Expert Panel's Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System](#), Department of Education, December 2023, p 68.

<sup>181</sup> Australian Universities Accord Final Report, p 22.

<sup>182</sup> Australian Universities Accord Final Report, p 22.

<sup>183</sup> Australian Universities Accord Final Report, p 76.

<sup>184</sup> Australian Universities Accord Final Report, pp 125-127.

### Issue for Consideration 18

Acknowledging the importance of timely and relevant careers advice to students across all life stages, and its pivotal role in nurturing aspiration and building confidence and improving tertiary education attainment, improve careers advice through measures including, but not limited to:

- undertaking a national comprehensive assessment to investigate the accessibility, effectiveness and quality of current careers advice delivery, including identifying good practices
- developing a consistent national framework for careers advice across all life stages.

### Commissioner's Note

An additional strategy to identify and reward individuals and communities excelling in the provision of high-quality careers advice would be the introduction of a new national award for regional, rural and remote careers advice excellence. The Commissioner proposes the establishment of a new category in the Society for the Provision of Education in Rural Australia (SPERA) Australian Rural Education Awards for 'Contribution to Careers Advice Excellence' in regional, rural and remote areas.

## Collective and independent outreach

Alongside careers advice, another key element to nurturing the aspiration and building the confidence of regional people to achieve their ambitions is outreach. Outreach activities, designed to raise student awareness of future tertiary education and career pathways, have traditionally included universities, not-for-profit, or other community or industry organisations visiting schools or career events to discuss post-school education and employment opportunities. The Commissioner supports a broad view of outreach and believes that appropriately designed outreach activities need to begin in primary school and extend through to post-school activities relevant for people looking for a career change later in life.

The Commissioner heard from stakeholders, including students in the South Australia Rural Youth Ambassadors program, that university-led outreach activities are often too focused on their own programs and higher education being the 'only option' and it felt more like 'marketing exercises'. The Commissioner also heard that the most successful outreach activities are those built from 'the ground up' within communities.

The Eastern Australia Regional University Centre Partnership (EARUCP) provides a good example of a community-led approach to outreach. EARUCP is facilitated by the Country Universities Centre (CUC) and University of Technology Sydney (UTS) and involves collaborations between 15 Regional University Study Hubs and 23 universities across Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria and the ACT. The EARUCP delivers locally tailored community outreach initiatives designed to widen university participation and nurture the aspiration of young people living in regional, rural and remote Australia.<sup>185</sup>

Each individual sub-project is unique and designed to address specific community challenges, make use of local advantages, and draw upon the resources and expertise of university partners. Outreach initiatives are institution neutral and culturally appropriate as they assist students, parents and carers in developing their understanding of future possibilities and knowledge of post-school options.

<sup>185</sup> University of Technology Sydney, [The case for community-led Regional University Study Hubs](#), 21 October 2024.

*'The partnership is one that genuinely respects the knowledges and practices of regional communities and strives to work with them to create something new for collective impact, rather than prescribe a predetermined approach to outreach and widening participation activities. This new approach reimagines widening participation in regional Australia and takes practical steps to work alongside regional communities to develop their own solutions to supporting young people to access higher education in their community'.<sup>186</sup>*

Chris Ronan, CEO, Country Universities Centre

### **CASE STUDY:** Community-led partnerships developed by the Eastern Australia Regional University Centre Partnership

**Dream Thinkers:** This program is a collaboration between CUC Far West, Macquarie University, Charles Sturt University and the University of Wollongong. The program is designed for students in Years 5 and 6 prior to their transition to high school. The program includes interactive and hands-on activities through which students explore their own skills and strengths and identify future goals.<sup>187</sup>

**Parents & Pathways:** This program is a collaboration between CUC Western Riverina, Charles Sturt University and The University of Notre Dame. Over three information sessions, parents and carers are provided with the knowledge and tools to help nurture and support their family throughout all stages of education. The program specifically covers the support offered by the Country Universities Centre, how higher education works and how to nurture the dreams and aspirations of regional kids. The program is directed at families with children in Year 6 and discusses the varied pathways that can be taken to higher education.<sup>188</sup>

**Ready Set Go:** This program is a collaboration between Gippsland East Local Learning & Employment Network, Federation University and Central Queensland University (CQU). The program nurtures the aspirations of students in primary and high school through incursions, excursions and parents/carers forums.<sup>189</sup>

There are a number of outreach programs run by universities to specifically nurture aspirations of First Nations students to pursue a higher education pathway and provide the practical experience of being on campus. Activities such as week-long, intensive camp experiences are currently bringing First Nations students on to 24 university campuses.<sup>190</sup>

In research funded by the Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success, First Nations school students highlighted the benefits of making connections with other like-minded First Nations school and university students at these events, building the foundations of strong and supportive networks.<sup>191</sup>

To ensure the success of these outreach activities, universities need to commit to continuing to engage with students after the outreach activity and including First Nations cultural perspectives in the outreach programs.

<sup>186</sup> University of Technology Sydney, [Smoothing the pathway to university](#), 3 April 2023, 2024.

<sup>187</sup> Lim J, [Dream Thinkers Far West Program](#), [dreamthinkersfarwest.my.canva.site](#), accessed 17 October 2024.

<sup>188</sup> Country Universities Centre Western Riverina, [Parents & Pathways](#), [cucwesternriverina.edu.au](#), accessed 17 October 2024.

<sup>189</sup> Gippsland East Study Hub, [Ready Set Go](#), [gestudyhub.org](#), accessed 17 October 2024.

<sup>190</sup> Barney K, [Building a stronger evidence base to support effective outreach strategies for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students: Increasing impact and university participation](#), National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, Curtin University, 2022, p 7.

<sup>191</sup> Barney K, [Building a stronger evidence base to support effective outreach strategies for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students](#), pp 62–63.

## Skills shortages in the regions

The roles that quality careers advice and outreach can play in nurturing the aspirations and building the confidence of young people in the regions are particularly vital in the context of addressing pressing regional skills shortages. The majority of future, and indeed current, jobs will require post-secondary qualifications,<sup>192</sup> so we must ensure that regional, rural and remote students are supported with the encouragement and confidence to pursue tertiary pathways in order to develop a strong and responsive regional workforce.

Whilst there are areas of workforce shortage across the country at any given time, regional, rural and especially remote communities are hit particularly hard by shortages – with smaller populations and greater distance between them, in some regional communities there may only be a single doctor's practice, childcare provider or veterinary clinic. Or indeed, none at all.

Many of these sorts of essential occupations are currently recognised as facing skills shortages that become increasingly dire as distance increases. These shortages can even produce a compounding effect whereby the worse they are the more difficult they become to address. This is because the lack of new skilled workers places greater strain on the existing workforce and leaves fewer experts available to fill training or mentoring roles. A shortage in one area can also impact another, as access to essential services such as childcare or a local GP is often a significant deciding factor when moving to or remaining in a regional location.

In the long-term, improving education access and attainment within regional, rural and remote communities would contribute to ensuring a pipeline of homegrown workers. However, whilst this pipeline is building, strategies to attract and retain new workers to regional, rural and remote communities are equally important. This includes supporting the existing, and often overworked, workforce through increased access to professional development and upskilling opportunities where desired, support networks and subsidies where needed, as well as easing the transition to living in a new regional area for those moving to the regions for work (such as through access to housing and guaranteed childcare places).



*Image Caption: RDA Orana 2024 Inland Growth Summit. Regional Education Commissioner presents as part of the 'Training and Education' session  
L-R: Tom O'Dea, Head of nbn Local for Regional, Rural and Remote NSW, Natalie Bramble, CEO Click2Learn, Tanya Mitchell, President ICPA NSW, Amanda Ferrari, Director Boarding Schools Expo Australia, the Hon Fiona Nash, Regional Education Commissioner*

192 Jobs and Skills Australia, [Annual Jobs and Skills Report 2023](#), p 18.

## CASE STUDY: The Welcome Experience

The Welcome Experience is a free service, provided by the New South Wales government and delivered by the Regional Development Australia (RDA) network, that supports essential workers (in sectors such as health, aged care and education) who relocate to regional communities for work. A 'Local Connector' from the community will help the incoming worker and their family to access housing and other services such as education and health care, as well as helping them to integrate with local community groups and events. In 2024, this program was expanded across the Riverina after a successful pilot in Griffith in 2023. 'Since the program began, 44 individuals and their families — working in health, education, police and fire and rescue — have already made the move to Griffith.'<sup>193</sup>

### *Local solutions for regional communities*

In considering measures to address workforce issues in the regions it is important to note that, quite simply, not all regional communities are the same. Whilst many of the key areas facing skills shortages, such as teachers, GPs and veterinarians, are broadly shared across regional, rural and remote Australia, we cannot treat shortages as one size fits all. The needs and capacities of individual regions are granular and often specific to that region – for example, problems facing a town on the Eyre Peninsula will be different from those being faced in Mount Isa.

## CASE STUDY: Grow Our Own Riverina

Grow Our Own is a collaborative alliance between businesses, industry, education providers and government agencies from the Riverina region facilitated by Regional Development Australia (RDA) Riverina. Members work together to develop locally tailored resources and programs that seek to inform and inspire young people to live, work and learn in the Riverina. Bringing together local, cross-sector expertise and experience, Grow Our Own promotes local career opportunities and learning pathway options for young people from schools to tertiary education – providing resources and information, and coordinating local engagement programs.<sup>194</sup>

The Jobs and Skills Australia's Skills Priority List accounts for 'regional' skill shortages at a national and state/territory level. This is positive, but does not factor in the distinct differences between individual regional, rural and remote communities.

### **Commissioner's Note**

Where possible, mapping of skills shortages should more specifically tailor for regional differences to allow for more localised skills and workforce planning. This more granular information would then be able to directly support the workforce pipeline by informing access to incentives, support measures and programs.

<sup>193</sup> Regional Development Australia Riverina, [Program expansion helps essential workers relocate to the Riverina](https://rdariverina.org.au), rdariverina.org.au, 9 September 2024, accessed 31 October 2024.

<sup>194</sup> Regional Development Australia Riverina, [About Us – Grow Our Own](https://growourown.org.au), growourown.org.au, accessed 31 October 2024.

## Regional, rural and remote veterinary workforce

Whilst there are numerous industries across regional, rural and remote communities that are facing substantial workforce shortages, the Commissioner has repeatedly heard that the shortage of rural, large animal veterinarians is a particularly pressing issue.

Veterinary workforce shortages in regional, rural and remote Australia are severe and getting worse. Approximately 40 per cent of the job vacancies being advertised by regional veterinary practices are remaining unfilled after 12 months or more.<sup>195</sup> Such vacancy rates are particularly dire for more specialised practice types that are typically located, and relied upon, in regional, rural and remote areas such as mixed-practice, equine and livestock veterinarians.<sup>196</sup>

These shortages represent an industry on the edge of crisis – not only in terms of the wellbeing of the overworked regional veterinarians themselves, but also a potential crisis in terms of biosecurity, animal welfare, food safety and security, and ultimately the wider economy.

As has been recognised in reviews, such as the New South Wales Parliamentary Inquiry,<sup>197</sup> education is a key factor in alleviating this crisis by providing a robust pipeline of prospective rural veterinarians. The first aspect of this is providing support for veterinary students – as they initially access their training, during their training, and as they move into the workforce. Aspiring veterinarians growing up in the regions should be able to access training in the regions that prepares them for practice in regional, rural and remote Australia, but there are significant access barriers.

As described in the Tertiary Education chapter, many regional, rural and remote students have no choice but to leave home for tertiary study. This is a significant financial expense and, in many cases, may prevent the student from furthering their education. Existing supports, such as the Tertiary Access Payment, Fares Allowance, and Relocation Scholarship, are a good start, but as acknowledged in the Accord final report, these are not always adequate.<sup>198</sup>

The costs of tertiary study are compounded by the requirement of mandatory placements during veterinary courses – the costs of further relocation and/or travel, the forgoing of paid employment and the lack of access to childcare are particularly pressing challenges for regional students. The Budget announcement of a new Commonwealth Prac Payment of \$319.50 per week for students undertaking mandatory placements in teaching, nursing and midwifery is a positive step.<sup>199</sup> However, despite targeting essential workers in sectors facing notable skill shortages it does not include veterinary students as eligible. Rural large animal veterinarians should be regarded as essential workers. Veterinary science students, potentially prioritising students from regional, rural or remote communities undertaking a placement in the regions, should be eligible for this payment.

195 Australian Veterinary Association, [Submission of the AVA Ltd to the Inquiry into the veterinary workforce shortages in New South Wales](#), July 2023, p 4.

196 Australian Veterinary Association, [Pre-Budget Submission – 2024 May Federal Budget](#), January 2024, p 8.

197 Banasiak M, [Veterinary workforce shortages in New South Wales](#), NSW Parliament Legislative Council Portfolio Committee No. 4 – Regional NSW, Report no 58, 28 June 2024.

198 *Australian Universities Accord Final Report*, pp 266-267.

199 Department of Education, [Introduction of a new Commonwealth Prac Payment, Budget Papers 2024-25](#), 14 May 2024. Note – payment amount is benchmarked to the single Austudy rate.



Another factor underpinning the education-workforce pipeline for rural veterinarians is the need to support delivery of veterinary science training in the regions. Across the board, regional universities face additional costs of delivery compared to their metropolitan counterparts – they operate in smaller population centres, with lower student density and higher administrative costs, and with less capacity to attract high-value investments, philanthropy, or additional funding from international students.

This generally higher cost of delivering tertiary education in the regions is intensified in the specific context of veterinary science. A study by the Veterinary Schools of Australia and New Zealand (VSANZ) found that veterinary science courses, both undergraduate and postgraduate, are the most expensive professional courses for universities to deliver.<sup>200</sup> This is due to the highly specialised nature of the training and resources needed, and the necessity of low student/staff ratios. An increase to Commonwealth funding to universities delivering veterinary degrees focussed on large animal and rural practice should be considered to recognise and support the additional cost of delivery for these veterinary schools.

Similarly, there is a need to support clinical training in the regions to better prepare prospective veterinarians for rural practice. High costs of operating and attracting staff to rural veterinary practices means that their viability is threatened, and many are being forced to close. This has a significant flow-on effect in terms of the preparedness and rural experience of veterinary graduates, as they have increasingly limited options to access rural veterinary clinical pathways.

The lack of access to these pathways has a compounding effect on the workforce shortage, further contributing to the growing lack of specialised large animal, livestock and equine veterinarians and placing an even greater strain on the viability of rural practices. In the health sector, the Rural Health Multidisciplinary Training Program facilitates collaboration between government and rural medical schools in providing a network of specialised rural medical practices that deliver both government health services and teaching and clinical training opportunities. A network based on similar principles of rural veterinary practices could be considered as a way to both increase access to government supported veterinary services and support rural-specific clinical training.

As has been discussed in relation to broader workforce shortages, measures to incentivise rural veterinary practice should be considered to bolster the local workforce. Akin to what is provided for rural medical students, a HELP debt reduction measure for veterinary graduates going on to rural practice could be successful. Similarly, additional workforce attraction and retention incentives could encourage more graduate veterinarians to take up rural practice and support them to stay once they do. These incentives could come in the form of subsidies, support to access housing or childcare, or increased professional development opportunities.

Over the last 12 months the Commissioner has consulted closely with those practising in the veterinary sector, the Australian Veterinary Association and Jobs and Skills Australia on the growing crisis facing communities accessing veterinarians in regional, rural and remote Australia. This is a complex issue that cuts across multiple portfolios and will require comprehensive action to meaningfully address. A National Rural Veterinary Workforce Strategy, led by an expert panel appointed by the Minister for Skills and Training, is something that should be developed and implemented.

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200 Veterinary Schools of Australia and New Zealand, [Rethinking Veterinary Education](#), June 2023, p iv.



### Issue for Consideration 19

Immediately address the critical veterinary workforce shortage in regional, rural and remote Australia through measures including, but not limited to:

- developing a Rural Veterinary Workforce Strategy
- providing HELP fee relief to encourage early career veterinarians to work in rural areas
- extending the eligibility of the Commonwealth Prac Payment to include veterinary science students
- supplementing university admissions processes to ensure places for students with a commitment to regional, rural and remote practice
- increasing Commonwealth funding to universities delivering veterinary degrees focussed on large animal and rural practice and/or end to end training in regional, rural and remote areas
- developing a network of rural veterinary practices and/or clinical training facilities that can provide teaching in collaboration with veterinary schools and the development of a rural-specific veterinary training pathway.

## A 'homegrown' regional workforce

The challenges facing sectors of the regional workforce, such as veterinarians, cannot be simply addressed through the attraction and retention of skilled workers, international, metropolitan or from other regions – to truly bolster a robust and skilled regional workforce we must tap into the benefits of local education to develop a clear education-workforce pipeline.

Regional students should have the opportunity where possible to be able to study regionally. Not only does this increase access and reduce costs for the student, but training regionally leads to graduates being more likely to remain and work in the regions after graduation. Data from the medical and allied health professions consistently shows that students of rural origin are far more likely to work in the regions after graduation.<sup>201</sup> If these aspiring regional students are instead left with no choice but to relocate, often to metropolitan locations, many are less likely to return to the regions at the end of their studies – or indeed may not undertake tertiary study at all. Developing clear local pathways and ensuring access to them will help to give regional students the confidence to move into tertiary studies and be in turn more likely to work regionally once they finish.

201 Medical Deans Australia and New Zealand, [National Data Report 2024](#), May 2024, pp 27–31; Monash Rural Health, [Nursing and Allied Health Graduate Outcome Tracking \(NAHGOT\) study](#), monash.edu, accessed 1 May 2024.

## CASE STUDY: Roxby Downs Childcare Project

The Roxby Downs Childcare Project is an Australian Rural Education Award winning collaboration between Uni Hub Spencer Gulf Roxby Downs, Roxby Downs Children's Centre, industry partner BHP and academic partner CQU to facilitate the local delivery of a Cert III in Early Childhood Education and Care to Roxby Downs residents.

Roxby Downs is a remote mining town in South Australia with a highly transient population and a notable shortage of qualified ECEC educators. Uni Hub Spencer Gulf provided support and mentoring for the students as they undertook a combination of online learning and practical training in-person in Roxby Downs.

Of the 10 students involved in the initial round of the project, six are now employed by the childcare centre in Roxby Downs.<sup>202</sup>

Whilst the understanding that those who train in the regions are more likely to stay in the regions has been expressed to the Commissioner by many stakeholders, and is underpinned by evidence including work commissioned by the Regional Universities Network,<sup>203</sup> to develop a more comprehensive plan for a 'homegrown' workforce more extensive data on graduate mobility is needed. Developing a region-level knowledge base of where students are training and where they go on to work post-graduation would allow for more targeted supports and enhanced policy design for each region.

### Issue for Consideration 20

Undertake an analysis of tertiary student graduate mobility to inform future policy design by obtaining a region-specific understanding of where regional, rural and remote students train and where they go on to work.

A broad, long-term strategic approach to regional education, and regional development more generally, is an important aspect of facilitating a homegrown workforce that can not only address current shortages but create future opportunities. The Regional Australia Institute's (RAI) work in developing the Regionalisation Ambition framework represents a statement of intent from a large collective of cross-sector regional stakeholders, setting out a series of strategic targets to ensure that the regions are set up to make the most of future opportunities and provide the best for every regional, rural and remote community.<sup>204</sup>

Similarly, the ongoing development of Jobs and Skills Australia's Regional, Rural and Remote Jobs and Skills Roadmap is a promising opportunity to identify ways to enhance the regional workforce, meet regional employment opportunities and deliver future prosperity.<sup>205</sup>

202 Owen-Thomas J, [Outback town trains locals in childcare to solve staffing shortage](#), *InDaily*, 23 July 2024.

203 Regional Universities Network, [Economic Impact of the Regional Universities Network](#), Nous Group, August 2020.

204 Regional Australia Institute, [Regionalisation Ambition 2032: A Framework to Rebalance the Nation](#), 13 September 2022.

205 Jobs and Skills Australia, [Towards a Regional, Rural and Remote Jobs and Skills Roadmap: Interim Report](#), Australian Government, October 2024.

Of course, developing a truly 'homegrown' workforce for the regions is by no means simple - doing so means dealing with many of the complex and interrelated challenges that have been discussed throughout this report. Currently, the lower tertiary education and participation in regional, rural and remote areas is impacting the future outcomes of these students and contributing to workforce shortages in these areas. To nurture the aspiration and build the confidence of students in the regions to participate in and complete tertiary education, the Commissioner proposes the development of a program to facilitate stronger connections between education providers, local industry and community organisations.



*Image Caption: Regional Education Commissioner and Kerry Grace, Founder, Ready Communities, at the Social Impact in the Regions Conference, 5 September 2024*

## Proposal for Consideration

### Regional Education Collaborate and Connect Program

To facilitate strong and sustainable connections between regional, rural and remote education providers, industry and community, the Commissioner proposes establishing a Regional Education Collaborate and Connect (REC Connect) program.

The REC Connect program would provide opportunities and clear pathways to support regional students and career changers to engage with tertiary education. Through increased education access and tertiary attainment in the regions, this program would provide improved outcomes for regional, rural and remote students and help produce a stronger 'homegrown' regional workforce to address persistent skills shortages.

The REC Connect program would involve the establishment of a local Regional Program Director for each region with comprehensive knowledge of the school and tertiary system and a strong understanding of local skills needs. The Regional Program Director would draw on and build local connections to forge strategic relationships between relevant education, industry and community stakeholders. Through these relationships, the Regional Program Director could undertake mapping of community workforce needs, educational availability and access to pathways/supports. Using this knowledge, they could then coordinate and oversee the delivery of outreach and aspiration raising activities, support the delivery of high-quality careers advice, engage in long-term regional education planning and act as a respected advocate for the region in engagement with local, state and federal policymakers.

These are examples of the sorts of activities that the Regional Program Director could undertake, however the key aspect of the program is the flexibility to be guided by the needs of the community. It is vital that the Regional Program Director be a local with community knowledge and connections whilst remaining unbiased – they should not be associated with any single institution or industry.

The REC Connect program, via the work of its Regional Program Directors, would seek to address issues raised by stakeholders, such as careers advice, aspiration and outreach. Careers advice currently differs greatly in delivery, quality and scope across regions. When outreach is solely delivered by individual universities, regional, rural and remote students are not provided the full range of opportunities that are available to them. As it stands, many of the relationships between educational stakeholders in the regions tend to be competitive or simply absent altogether. This results in inconsistent access to information regarding pathways and support (financial, academic or pastoral) for tertiary study, and ultimately lower overall confidence of regional, rural and remote students in pursuing post-school options.

Regional Program Directors would sit within regional community organisations and be funded through an open contestable grants program that would allow organisations to put forward proposals that are tailored to local needs and contexts. An expert panel, informed by program guidelines, could select a small number of grant recipients to act as an initial pilot to measure success and potential of future expansion. Once a grant is successful, Regional Program Directors would be selected and guided by a local community board to foster local 'ownership' of the program. This model would seek to draw on the success of the Regional University Study Hubs program in tailoring the needs of each Hub to its regional context.

**Proposal for Consideration**

Establish a 'Regional Education Collaborate and Connect' program to facilitate strong and sustainable connections between regional, rural and remote education providers, industry and community to:

- nurture the aspiration and build the confidence of regional, rural and remote students
- ensure regional, rural and remote people are better informed about, and supported to pursue, post-secondary education and career pathways
- increase tertiary participation and attainment for people in regional, rural and remote communities
- facilitate a strong and sustainable 'homegrown' workforce that can address region-specific skills and workforce needs
- work towards shared community goals, and ultimately seek to deliver stronger regional, rural and remote communities.

The REC Connect program could play a significant role in improving access to, and uptake of, education in the regions and providing students with the resources to navigate a pathway into tertiary education and the workforce beyond.

The opportunities and ideas presented in this proposal, and the report more broadly, represent potential avenues to ensure that people in the regions are able to access, and make the most of, the benefits of education. Doing so will enable people in regional, rural and remote Australia to pursue their ambitions and reach their full potential, ultimately growing stronger regional communities right across the country.

# APPENDICES



## Appendix A: Consultations from 1 November 2023 up to 27 November 2024

### Stakeholders

#### *Early Childhood Education and Care*

- Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority
- Australian Education Union National Early Childhood Committee
- Contact Inc.
- Early Childhood Australia
- Professionals and Researchers in Early Childhood Intervention
- RAISEducation
- The Parenthood
- Thrive by Five

#### *Schools*

- Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership
- Armidale Catholic Schools
- Boarding Schools Expo Australia
- Bourke High School
- Central West Leadership Academy
- Clontarf Foundation
- Coalition of Regional Independent Schools Australia
- Indigenous Education and Boarding Australia
- Narrabri High School
- New Zealand Rural School Leaders Association
- Squiz Kids
- Stars Foundation
- South Australian Area Schools Leaders Association
- The Association of Independent Schools of NSW
- The Rockhampton Grammar School

***Students, parents and community***

- Australian Education Union
- Australian Education Union Victoria
- Australian Rural Leadership Foundation
- Children and Young People with Disability Australia
- Committee for Gippsland
- Community Connections Solutions Australia
- Contact Inc.
- Country Education Foundation of Australia
- East Gippsland Shire Council
- Editorial Board of the Australian and International Journal of Rural Education
- Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia
- Isolated Children's Parents' Association of NSW
- Jack James & Sons Pty Ltd, Trangie Bus Services
- Murrindindi Shire Council
- Murweh Shire Council
- Regional Australia Institute
- Regional Development Australia Adelaide Hills, Fleurieu and Kangaroo Island (SA)
- Regional Development Australia Great Southern (WA)
- Regional Development Australia Orana (NSW)
- Regional Development Australia Riverina (NSW)
- Regional Disability Advocacy Service
- South Australia Rural Youth Ambassadors
- Sustainable Economic Growth for Regional Australia (SEGRA)
- Teach for Australia
- Thrive Refugee Enterprise
- Victoria Rural Youth Ambassadors
- Vincent Fairfax Family Foundation

***Tertiary Education (including Vocational Education and Training and Higher Education)***

- Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success
- Chancellor Institute
- Charles Darwin University
- Charles Sturt University
- Country Universities Centre
- Country Universities Centre – Cape York
- Curtin University
- Edith Cowan University
- Geraldton Universities Centre
- GOTAFE

- Great Southern Universities Centre
- Independent Tertiary Education Council Australia
- James Cook University
- La Trobe University
- Open Universities Australia
- Regional Universities Network
- Southern Cross University
- TasTAFE
- TAFE Directors Australia
- TAFE Gippsland
- TAFE Queensland
- The University of Melbourne
- Universities Australia
- University of Canberra
- University of New England
- University of Newcastle
- University of the Sunshine Coast
- University of Sydney
- University of Tasmania
- University of Wollongong

### ***Industry and employment***

- Australian School of Entrepreneurship
- Australian Veterinary Association
- BOP Industries
- Evolve Network
- Futurity Investment Group
- iClick2Learn
- Larkin Sykes
- Motor Traders' Association of New South Wales
- National Electrical and Communications Association
- National Broadband Network
- Workforce Australia – Far West Orana
- Year13
- YouthWorX NT



**Health**

- Business Council of Co-operatives and Mutuals
- Healthy Communities Foundation Australia Ltd
- Malpa
- Marathon Health
- Medical Deans Australia and New Zealand
- Monash Rural Health
- National Rural Health Alliance
- National Rural Health Commissioner
- Royal Far West
- Royal Flying Doctor Service
- Rural Doctors Network
- South West Aboriginal Medical Service (WA)

**Cross-sector**

- Professor Barney Glover AO, Commissioner of Jobs and Skills Australia
- Professor Bob Morgan AO, Chair, Board of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Education and Research (BATSIER), Conjoint Professor, Wollotuka Institute, University of Newcastle
- Distinguished Professor Larissa Behrendt AO, Chair of Indigenous Research, Director of Research and Academic Programs, Jumbunna Institute of Indigenous Education & Research, University of Technology Sydney
- Dr Chris Sarra, Chief Executive Officer, Founder and Chairman of the Stronger Smarter Institute
- Professor John McKendrick, Commissioner for Fair Access in Scotland
- Professor Paul Worley, Executive Director, Clinical Innovation, Riverland Academy of Clinical Excellence, Editor in Chief – Rural and Remote Health
- Chris Matthies, National Education and Care Services, Freedom of Information Commissioner
- Jackie Wilson, National Education and Care Services, Ombudsman and Privacy Commissioner

### **Public Service**

- Tony Cook PSM, Secretary, Australian Government Department of Education
- Ben Rimmer, Deputy Secretary, Higher Education, Research and International Group, Australian Government Department of Education
- Kylie Crane PSM, Deputy Secretary, Early Childhood and Youth Group, Australian Government Department of Education
- Meg Brighton, Deputy Secretary, Schools Group, Australian Government Department of Education
- Madonna Morton, First Assistant Secretary, Higher Education Division, Australian Government Department of Education
- Anne Twyman, First Assistant Secretary, Programs, Payments and Early Learning Division, Australian Government Department of Education
- Danielle Donegan, First Assistant Secretary, Australian Universities Accord Division, Australian Government Department of Education
- Kate Chipperfield, Assistant Secretary, Access, Equity and Social Inclusion Branch, Australian Government Department of Education
- Kiel Williams-Weigel, Assistant Secretary, First Nations Participation and Place Based Partnerships Branch, Australian Government Department of Education
- Mark Barraket, Deputy Secretary, Early Childhood Outcomes, NSW Department of Education
- Chloe Read, Deputy Secretary, Education and Skills Reform, NSW Department of Education
- Mark Grant, Deputy Secretary, Chief Operating Officer, NSW Department of Education
- Dorelle Anderson, Deputy Chief Executive and Central Australian Regional Controller, Department of the Chief Minister and Cabinet, Northern Territory Government
- Regional University Study Hubs Team, Australian Government Department of Education

### **Government Agencies**

- Australian Government Department of Health and Aged Care
- Australian Government Department of Employment and Workplace Relations
- Australian Government Department of Social Services
- Jobs and Skills Australia
- New South Wales Department of Education
- Productivity Commission
- Queensland Department of Education

## Roundtables

- First Nations Regional, Rural and Remote Education Roundtable convened by the Regional Education Commissioner – 16 September 2024
  - Professor Bob Morgan AO – Chair, Board of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Education and Research (BATSIER), Conjoint Professor, Wollotuka Institute, University of Newcastle (Organiser)
  - Distinguished Professor Larissa Behrendt AO – Chair of Indigenous Research, Director Research and Academic Programs, Jumbunna Institute of Indigenous Education & Research, University of Technology Sydney (Facilitator of Roundtable)
  - Professor Anne Poelina – Chair Indigenous Knowledges, Senior Research Fellow, Nulungu Research Institute, University of Notre Dame (Broome)
  - Professor Wendy Brabham – Director and Board Member, Wathaurong Aboriginal Co-operative
  - Professor Rob Tierney – Dean Emeritus of Education, University of British Columbia
  - Councillor Anne Dennis – Councillor, New South Wales Aboriginal Land Council North West Region and Vice President, NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc.
  - Nathan Towney – Pro Vice Chancellor Indigenous Strategy and Leadership, Head of the Wollotuka Institute, The University of Newcastle
  - Fiona Kelly – Executive Principal, Menindee Central School
  - Daniel Fusi – Senior Leader, Community Engagement, Menindee Central School
  - Doreen Peters – Senior Leader Community Engagement, Walgett Community College High School
  - Ian Perdisat – Researcher, University of Newcastle, Director of Operations, Madjulla Inc.
  - James Ballangarry – Project Analyst and Research Coordinator, The Wollotuka Institute, The University of Newcastle
  - Kiel Williams-Weigel – Assistant Secretary, First Nations Participation and Place Based Partnerships Branch, Department of Education
- Equity in Higher Education Panel Meeting – 19 June 2024
- Jobs and Skills Australia Roundtable, Food Supply Chain – 11 June 2024
- Jobs and Skills Australia, Veterinarian Workforce Roundtable – 31 July 2024
- Regional Stakeholder Roundtable – Accord Implementation Committee (Ongoing)
- Rural and Remote Advocacy Roundtable, Strategic Review of the Australian Apprenticeship System – 11 July 2024
- Workforce Australia – Far West Orana, Health Care and Social Assistance Working Group – 22 August 2024

## Engagements

- Australian Boarding Schools Summit – 27 August 2024
- Charles Sturt University Dubbo Campus 2024 Graduation Ceremony – 27 May 2024
- Engagement Australia Conference – 21 November 2023
- Federation University Churchill Campus – 15 October 2024
- Gippsland Tech School – 15 October 2024
- Healthy Communities Foundation Australia, Collarenebri Visit – 13 December 2023
- Independent Tertiary Education Council Australia (ITECA) ITEC 2024 Conference – 6 June 2024
- Industry Skills Roundtable hosted by Committee for Gippsland – 15 October 2024
- Isolated Children's Parents' Association Federal Conference – 24 July 2024
- Isolated Children's Parents' Association NSW Conference – 6 March 2024
- Marathon Health Dubbo – 28 February 2024
- Monash Rural Health Warragul – 14 October 2024
- Narrabri High School, Health Careers Highlights Immersion Program, Mines Rescue Facility, Gunnedah – 25 September 2024
- National Regional and Economic Development Summit, Sustainable Economic Growth for Regional Australia (SEGRA) Foundation – 31 October 2024 (online)
- Regional Australia Institute Annual Research Forum – 22 February 2024 (online)
- Regional Development Australia Orana Inland Growth Summit – Training and Education Seminar – 21 February 2024
- Regional Development Australia Orana Youth Forum – 6 November 2024
- Social Impact in the Regions Conference – 5 September 2024
- Trangie Health Service – 9 October 2024
- Universities Australia Treasurer's Post-Budget Address Lunch – 15 May 2024
- University of New England – 3–4 April 2024
- University of Newcastle, Looking Ahead Lecture – 19 November 2024
- University of Tasmania, Cradle Coast of Academic Community of Practice – Australian Universities Accord Symposium – 21 November 2024
- Western Sydney University Study Hub Fairfield Connect & Release of the Final Report of the Australian Universities Accord Review – 25 February 2024

## Appendix B: Relevant Education Sector Reviews and Programs

### Early Childhood Education and Care

#### *Productivity Commission Early Childhood Education and Care inquiry*

The Productivity Commission Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) inquiry delivered its final report to Government on 28 June 2024.<sup>206</sup> The report, titled *A path to universal early childhood education and care* was publicly released on 18 September 2024. The report focuses on improvements to ECEC availability, affordability, inclusivity, flexibility and regulation that will help to deliver 30 hours (or three days) of quality ECEC a week for all children aged 0–5.

The Commissioner made a submission responding to the draft report on 6 February 2024, and a submission responding to the inquiry's consultation paper on 19 May 2023.

#### *Australian Competition and Consumer Commission Childcare Inquiry*

The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission released its Childcare inquiry 2023 final report on 29 January 2024.<sup>207</sup>

The final report contains findings related to the costs, prices and competition within the Australian ECEC market. It also makes recommendations to achieve accessibility and affordability for children and families across Australia.

The inquiry found that childcare providers supply services for children and households across significantly different locations and care types, and that market forces alone are not meeting the needs of all children and households. It suggests that a mix of different regulatory measures and government support is likely to be required to meet the needs of different types of children and households in a range of different locations and circumstances. This includes considering supply-side subsidies in areas that have very high costs to supply and would otherwise be considered unprofitable or unviable.

#### *Jobs and Skills Australia Early Childhood Education and Care Workforce Capacity Study*

Jobs and Skills Australia released its ECEC Workforce Capacity Study report on 3 September 2024.<sup>208</sup>

The Workforce Capacity Study delivers findings and recommendations that provide insights into current and future workforce planning needs in the ECEC sector. The Workforce Capacity Study found that:

- a substantial uplift in workforce levels is needed to meet current and future demand
- it is important to put in place sustainable ongoing learning and development for all staff
- there is a need to ensure strong foundations for rewarding ECEC careers.

The Workforce Capacity Study's consultation paper was published on 20 November 2023. The Commissioner made a submission responding to this paper on 18 December 2023.

206 Productivity Commission, [A path to universal early childhood education and care](#), Inquiry report no. 106, Vol. 1, 2024.

207 Australian Competition and Consumer Commission, [Childcare inquiry: Final report](#), December 2023.

208 Jobs and Skills Australia, [The Future of the Early Childhood Education Profession: Early Childhood Education and Care Workforce Capacity Study](#), 2024.

### ***Early Years Strategy***

The Australian Government has developed an Early Years Strategy which sets out its vision for the education, development and wellbeing of young children in Australia and their families.

The Hon Amanda Rishworth MP, Minister for Social Services, and the Hon Dr Anne Aly MP, Minister for Early Childhood Education and Minister for Youth, launched the Strategy on 7 May 2024.<sup>209</sup>

The Strategy articulates how the Australian Government will support child-centred policy development, and target investment in early years supports and services over the next 10 years.

The Strategy includes five guiding principles to inform what the Government will do (from consultation to policy development through to delivery), and then how it will be done. The Strategy also has eight high-level outcomes. The outcomes describe what success looks like in achieving the vision of the Early Years Strategy. There are also four priority focus areas where the Australian Government will focus its attention to have the greatest impact to achieving the outcomes, and what will inform implementation of the Strategy.

### ***In Home Care Review***

In March 2023, the Department of Education commissioned a review of In Home Care (IHC). The final report was released in November 2023.<sup>210</sup>

The review found that the IHC program is partially meeting its objective of providing access to affordable ECEC for families unable to access it in other forms. However, it continues to experience notable challenges relating to workforce shortages, affordability and access.

### ***Inclusion Support Program Review***

In March 2023, the Department of Education commissioned a review of the Inclusion Support Program (ISP). The final report was released in November 2023.<sup>211</sup>

The review found that when the supports currently offered under the ISP – support and guidance from Inclusion Agencies, access to an additional educator and equipment from the specialist equipment library – are delivered and accessed as intended, the Program meets its objectives. However, current program resources are not being directed towards the activities which will have the greatest impact – and the program settings could be optimised to make this more likely.

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209 Department of Social Services, [The Early Years Strategy 2024–2034](#), 2024.

210 Department of Education, [Review of the In Home Care \(IHC\) program](#), November 2023.

211 Department of Education, [Review of the Inclusion Support Program](#), November 2023.

## Schools

### Australian Government

#### *Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System*

In December 2023, the Review Panel to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System report was published.<sup>212</sup> The Report provided **24 recommendations** across the seven reform directions (Lift Student Outcomes, Improve Equity, Improve Student Wellbeing, Attract and Retain Teachers, Reduce Data Gaps and Limitations, Enhance Funding Transparency and Accountability and Support Innovation and Achieve Reform). There were no regional-specific recommendations, however the general recommendations addressed critical equity cohort issues such as gaps in achievement.

The Commissioner contributed to this Review as a member of the Ministerial Reference Group and through a submission. Three ideas from the Commissioner's submission were referenced in the report:

- Resource-sharing initiatives and virtual education delivery to increase access to specialist subjects.
- Providing strong support for a more diverse teacher workforce.
- Elevating First Nations assistant teachers to 'partner' teachers.

The report contained recommendations for governments around coordinated data collection, sharing data, filling data gaps and better use of data to understand and monitor student outcomes and informed the development of the new federal-state school funding agreement in 2024.

#### *Better and Fairer Schools Agreement (BFSA)*

Drawing on the recommendations of the Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System, the government released the new national school funding agreement, the Better and Fairer Schools Agreement 2025–2034, on 31 July 2024.<sup>213</sup>

The Better and Fairer Schools Agreement is a 10-year agreement developed in collaboration with State and Territory governments, First Nations education representatives and non-government peak education bodies, and education representatives.

The Better and Fairer Schools Agreement also has set long-term targets for Year 12 certification, student attendance and learning equity, including specific targets for priority equity cohorts (including regional and remote students).

As of 19 November 2024, the Northern Territory, Western Australia, Tasmania and the Australian Capital Territory have signed on to the Better and Fairer Schools Agreement 10-year agreement. The Australian Government is continuing to negotiate with remaining jurisdictions.

Under the Agreement, states and territories also have a bilateral agreement with the Commonwealth setting up actions to improve student outcomes. This can include activities that support priority equity cohorts.

212 Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Schools Agreement, [Improving Outcomes for All: The Report of the Independent Expert Panel's Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System](#), Australian Government, December 2023.

213 Commonwealth of Australia, [Heads of Agreement \(Better and Fairer Schools Agreement 2025-2034\)](#), 31 July 2024.

### **National Teacher Workforce Action Plan**

In 2024, there were several new developments under the National Teacher Workforce Action Plan:<sup>214</sup>

- The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership recently published guidelines to support both early career teachers and initial education students, including in regional and remote areas. *The Guidelines for the Induction to Support Early Career Teachers* sets expectations for high-quality induction, while the *Professional Experience Guidelines* provides clear expectations and advice for consistent high-quality professional experience, including for placements in regional and remote settings, building on the existing resources already being used in some jurisdictions. These guidelines highlight the need to adequately support students while on placement in regional settings and to encourage metropolitan-based pre-service teachers to consider travelling further afield to experience placement diversity. Both sets of guidelines are available on AITSL's website (aitsl.edu.au).
- Expansion of the High Achieving Teachers Program to support more professionals to complete their accredited teaching qualification and make a successful transition into teaching, strengthening the teacher workforce. As part of phase 2 of the High Achieving Teachers (HAT) program expansion pilots, ten providers were successful in securing grants to provide close to 1500 places across Australia, in all states and territories, including in regional and remote areas.
- Commonwealth Teaching Scholarship – Round 1 of this scholarship program launched in May 2024, with the first round of scholarships awarded in August 2024. Round 2 opened on 25 November 2024.
- Microcredentials for Teachers – the University of Adelaide has been contracted to deliver three free professional development courses for teachers, including a microcredential in classroom management which became available in July 2024.

### **First Nations Teacher Strategy**

The Australian Government allocated \$2.4 million in the 2024-2025 budget to develop and implement the First Nations Teacher Strategy, to help attract and retain more First Nations teachers.<sup>215</sup>

### **Commonwealth Regional Scholarship program**

On 30 January 2024, the Government announced the delivery of 100 scholarships (worth up to \$20,000) to applicants selected from a pool of 353 applications.<sup>216</sup> In 2024, the Commissioner provided feedback on the evaluation of the Commonwealth Regional Scholarships Program.

### **Boarding grants and infrastructure**

The government is establishing a new \$18 million capital works fund to build new and improve existing boarding facilities in Central Australia for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from remote Northern Territory communities.<sup>217</sup>

214 Department of Education, [National Teacher Workforce Action Plan](#), education.gov.au, accessed 31 October 2024.

215 Department of Education, [Funding for the First Nations Teacher Strategy, Budget Papers 2024-25](#), 14 May 2024.

216 Department of Education, [Commonwealth Regional Scholarship Program](#), education.gov.au, accessed 31 October 2024.

217 McCarthy M, [\\$18 million boarding schools boost for Central Australia](#), Prime Minister and Cabinet Media Centre, 17 October 2024.



## States and territories

### ***Review of Secondary Education in the Northern Territory***

On 29 February 2024, the Northern Territory government published their final report for the Review of Secondary Education in the Northern Territory, to which the Commissioner made a submission in 2023.<sup>218</sup> The Northern Territory Government accepted all 15 of the Review's recommendations, which aim to inform the design of a Territory secondary education system that enables successful transitions beyond schooling for all students.

### ***Western Australia Pathways to Post-School Success Review***

The Western Australian Department of Education, in partnership with Catholic Education Western Australia (CEWA), and the Association of Independent Schools Western Australia (AISWA), has conducted a review of senior secondary pathways.<sup>219</sup> A discussion paper was drafted in late 2023, with the final report being released on 11 November 2024. The report makes 33 recommendations across 3 main reform areas to reframe the purposes of senior secondary education, build a system from learning goals and more fully recognise student diversity and achievement. The Commissioner met with the Director General of the Western Australian Department of Education regarding the review and made two submissions to the review.

### ***Inquiry into the State Education System in Victoria***

This review investigated five key issues impacting Victoria's education system including learning outcomes for students, targeted supports for students, teaching workforce issues, student wellbeing and school funding. A final report was tabled on 15 October 2024.<sup>220</sup>

### ***Tasmanian Review of the State's Education System***

The Tasmanian Review will respond to five key themes identified in the Terms of Reference – defining educational success, strengthening supports and engagement for all learners at all stages of their education, outcomes at the conclusion of the formal years of schooling, support for our teaching workforce, and accountability for improved outcomes.<sup>221</sup>

### ***South Australia Country Education Strategy***

The Country Education Strategy was updated in 2024.<sup>222</sup> The South Australian Government will broaden this work with a \$13.5 million investment over the next three years.

218 Northern Territory Department of Education, [Review of Secondary Education in the Northern Territory](#), Deloitte Access Economics, December 2023.

219 WA Government, [Pathways to Post-School Success Review](#), [pathwaysreview.wa.edu.au](#), accessed 26 November 2024.

220 Parliament of Victoria, [The state education system in Victoria: Inquiry October 2024](#), Legislative Council: Legal and Social Issues Committee, October 2024, p 149.

221 Tasmanian Government, [Independent Education Review](#), [ier.tas.gov.au](#), accessed 31 October 2024.

222 SA Department for Education, [Country Education Strategy – supporting improvements in country education](#), [education.sa.gov.au](#), accessed 31 October 2024.

### ***Review of Distance Learning Provision in New South Wales***

This review will consider how New South Wales provides access to curriculum, teaching and learning through the 11 schools for Distance Education in New South Wales.<sup>223</sup>

There are six focus areas of the review. These are equity, teaching and learning, student wellbeing, staffing, technology and system enablers, and the future. The review will consider best practices, current gaps and opportunities for the future. In August 2024, the Commissioner met with the New South Wales Department of Education who are undertaking a review of distance learning provisions in the state.

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223 NSW Department of Education, [Review of Distance Learning Provision in NSW Terms of Reference](#), 2024.

## Tertiary Education

### Australian Government

#### ***National Skills Agreement***

The National Skills Agreement is a 5-year joint agreement between the Commonwealth, states and territories to strengthen the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector. The agreement was agreed by National Cabinet in October 2023 and commenced on 1 January 2024.<sup>224</sup>

#### ***National Skills Plan***

The National Skills Plan (NSP) was released on 23 September 2024 as part of the National Skills Agreement. The National Skills Plan outlines Australian and state and territory governments' shared vision for the VET system.<sup>225</sup>

#### ***Australian Universities Accord***

The Australian Universities Accord was a 12-month review of Australia's higher education system. The Australian Universities Accord final report was released by the Minister for Education on 25 February 2024 and contained 47 recommendations.<sup>226</sup>

The Government has so far responded to 29 of the 47 recommendations in full or in part. Key reforms include:

- a commitment to establish a new Australian Tertiary Education Commission (ATEC) to provide stewardship of the tertiary education system
- measures to drive harmonisation between the higher education and VET sectors
- new Managed Growth and Needs-Based Funding systems, and
- changes to the HELP loan program.

#### ***Draft International Education and Skills Strategic Framework***

The Australian Government released the Draft International Education and Skills Strategic Framework on 11 May 2024.<sup>227</sup> The Framework aims to set a path for the government and the higher education sector to work together so international education continues to deliver benefits to Australia's economy, communities and international students.

224 Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, [National Skills Agreement](https://dewr.gov.au), dewr.gov.au, accessed 31 October 2024.

225 Skills and Workforce Ministerial Council, [National Skills Plan](#), Australian Government, 20 September 2024.

226 Australian Universities Accord Review Panel, [Australian Universities Accord Final Report](#), Australian Government, February 2024.

227 Department of Education, [Australia's International Education and Skills Strategic Framework: Draft for Consultation](#), Australian Government, 11 May 2024.

## Government programs to enhance integration between VET and Higher Education sectors

### *National Skills Taxonomy*

In June 2024, Jobs and Skills Australia released the National Skills Taxonomy (NST) discussion paper. The Australian Universities Accord identified the NST as crucial for creating a joined-up tertiary education system enhancing occupational mobility and supporting lifelong learning.<sup>228</sup>

### *National Skills Passport*

In September 2023, the Australian Government announced it would consult widely to develop a business case for a National Skills Passport, alongside the release of the Employment White Paper.<sup>229</sup>

The Australian Government released a consultation paper which found that a National Skills Passport could connect with other relevant services, supporting employers, employees and jobseekers, and promoting upskilling and reskilling behaviours to build a culture of lifelong learning.

## States and territories

### *New South Wales VET Review*

The New South Wales Government released the VET Review on 21 August 2024.<sup>230</sup> This review focused on identifying the strengths, gaps, and opportunities for improvement in skills development and training, to support students and workforce in New South Wales.

### *Victorian Skills Plan: A New Era for Skills*

The Victorian Government released the Victorian Skills Plan on 24 October 2023. This plan identifies actions and the further work needed to build a robust skills base and shape the next generation of skills delivery strategies.<sup>231</sup>

### *Skilled. Thriving. Connected: New VET Policy from South Australia*

The South Australian Government released the Skilled. Thriving. Connected – Our Policy Direction for Skills in South Australia Report in early 2024.<sup>232</sup> This report sets out a response to immediate skills needs and signals how the South Australian government will support South Australians to engage in education and training and transition into secure, well-paid jobs.

### *Queensland Skills Strategy 2024–2028*

The Queensland Government released the Queensland Skills Strategy in May 2024.<sup>233</sup> This strategy aims to provide pathways into good jobs for Queenslanders while delivering priority skills in traditional and emerging industries so Queensland's communities, industries and economy can thrive.

228 Jobs and Skills Australia, [National Skills Taxonomy Discussion Paper](#), 27 June 2024.

229 Department of Education, [National Skills Passport Consultation](#), 24 January 2024.

230 Bruniges M, Ardler J and Firth V, [NSW VET Review: Final Report](#), NSW Government, June 2024.

231 Victorian Skills Authority, [Victorian Skills Plan for 2023 into 2024](#), Victorian Government, October 2023.

232 Skills SA, [Skilled. Thriving. Connected: Our Policy Direction for Skills in South Australia](#), South Australian Government, March 2024.

233 Queensland Department of Employment, Small Business and Training, [Good Jobs, Great Training: Queensland Skills Strategy 2024–2028](#), 9 May 2024.

## Appendix C: Progress responding to the Halsey Review

Implementation and status updates for relevant recommendations responding to the Halsey Review have been provided by relevant department representatives.

Priority 1: Establishing a national focus for regional, rural and remote (RRR) education		
Recommendations	Implementation	Status
Recommendation 11: Establish a national focus for RRR education, training and research to enhance access, outcomes and opportunities in RRR Australia.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>The Australian Government continues to work with state and territory education departments and other educational authorities to ensure all students can access a high-quality education regardless of where they live.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Ongoing – the Better and Fairer Schools Agreement (BFSA) is a joint agreement between the Australian Government and jurisdictions to ensure that all students can enjoy a high-quality education, irrespective of their circumstances, socioeconomic background, ethnicity or postcode.</li><li>As of 19 November 2024, the Northern Territory, Western Australia, Tasmania and ACT have signed on to the BFSA 10-year agreement.</li><li>The Australian Government is continuing to negotiate with remaining jurisdictions.</li></ul>

Recommendations	Implementation	Status
Recommendation 11: Establish a national focus for RRR education, training and research to enhance access, outcomes and opportunities in RRR Australia.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, <a href="#">Explore Your Career   Your Career</a> has a suite of digital resources and information supporting RRR students including:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Publication of the School Leavers Information Kit (SLIK) to support informed decision making when leaving school; the SLIK has a dedicated booklet for Regional, Rural and Remote school leavers</li> <li>– The RRR card game supports educators and parents in RRR areas to start having conversations with younger school aged children about the world of work</li> <li>– The Australian Jobs Report (AJR) provides geographically diverse statistics on the workforce</li> <li>– Course and registered training provider search allowing the users to enter their location and see their localised training options</li> <li>– Tailored and targeted information and articles advocating and promoting careers in RRR areas for students</li> <li>– Your Career is the Governments trusted source of truth for careers information, providing a leadership role across states and territories for industry, occupation and financial support information for students and young people.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, Explore Your Career   Your Career website has ongoing information and resources supporting RRR students. These resources are updated regularly or through annual publications.</li> </ul>
Recommendation 11: Establish a national focus for RRR education, training and research to enhance access, outcomes and opportunities in RRR Australia.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ All Australian Government departments continue to report annually through the <b>Regional Ministerial Budget Statement</b> on progress in delivering improved access, outcomes and opportunities.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Ongoing – reporting released with the annual Budget cycle.</li> </ul>

## Priority 2: Enhancing leadership, teaching, curriculum and assessment

Recommendations	Implementation	Status
Recommendation 1: Establish and/or refine processes for ensuring the relevance of the Australian Curriculum and state/territory assessment processes for RRR students and communities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Version 9.0 of the Australian Curriculum was endorsed by all Education Ministers on 1 April 2022.</li> <li>State and territory curriculum authorities and school authorities are responsible for the implementation of the Australian Curriculum in their schools in line with system and jurisdictional policies and requirements.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ongoing – the Australian Government will continue to work through the Education Ministers Meeting to implement v9.0 of the Australian Curriculum. It should be noted that assessment processes are a matter for education authorities.</li> <li>In 2023, jurisdictions commenced progressively implementing the revised curriculum, according to their own timelines.</li> </ul>
Recommendation 2: Ensure RRR challenges and opportunities are explicitly included in the selection and pre-service education of teachers, initial appointment processes and their on-going professional support.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The Australian Government launched the Quality Initial Teacher Education Review on 15 April 2021.</li> <li>The Expert Panel, chaired by Lisa Paul AO PSM, consulted widely with stakeholders and undertook a number of engagement activities including webinars, focus groups, surveys and workshops.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Completed – the Final Report of the Review was released in February 2022.</li> <li>The Australian Government allocated funding to respond to the Review in the October 2022–23 Budget.</li> <li>Education Ministers agreed to the National Teacher Workforce Action Plan in December 2022. Initiatives are outlined below.</li> </ul>
Recommendation 2: Ensure RRR challenges and opportunities are explicitly included in the selection and pre-service education of teachers, initial appointment processes and their on-going professional support.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>From 2024–2028, the Australian Government will provide undergraduate and post graduate scholarships of up to \$40,000 (up to \$10,000 a year over four years for undergraduate students and up to \$10,000 a year over two years for postgraduate students) to attract high achieving students into teaching, including students from RRR areas.</li> <li>A top up payment of \$2,000 may be available for scholarship recipients who undertake their final year professional experience placement in a remote area.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The Australian Government allocated funding for the Commonwealth Teaching Scholarships in the October 2022–23 Budget.</li> <li>Round One scholarships were finalised on 30 June 2024. Round Two opened on 25 November 2024 for students commencing an accredited initial teacher education degree in 2025.</li> </ul>
Recommendation 2: Ensure RRR challenges and opportunities are explicitly included in the selection and pre-service education of teachers, initial appointment processes and their on-going professional support.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The Australian Government committed \$28.7 million over 2018–19 to 2022–23 to deliver the High Achieving Teachers (HAT) Program. This program is delivered by Teach For Australia (TFA) and La Trobe University. Funding to deliver an additional 760 places from 2023 is being provided to TFA and La Trobe University.</li> <li>In addition, under the National Teacher Workforce Action Plan, the Australian Government committed \$78.8 million over 2022–23 to 2026–27 to expand the HAT Program to support an additional 1,500 professionals to retrain as teachers.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>All elements of the Australian Government's commitment to the HAT program are underway. In September 2024, 10 providers were announced to deliver Phase 2 of the HAT expansion pilots, committed under NTWAP.</li> </ul>

Recommendations	Implementation	Status
Recommendation 2: Ensure RRR challenges and opportunities are explicitly included in the selection and pre-service education of teachers, initial appointment processes and their on-going professional support.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) is delivering initiatives relevant to RRR education, including developing cultural competency resources to support classroom teachers.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>AITSL developed a suite of resources and tools to better support the cultural capability of the teaching profession. AITSL released the intercultural development toolkit in 2022 and it is available for all teachers to access on their website: <a href="#">Building a culturally responsive Australian teaching workforce</a>.</li> </ul>
Recommendation 2: Ensure RRR challenges and opportunities are explicitly included in the selection and pre-service education of teachers, initial appointment processes and their on-going professional support.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The Australian Teacher Workforce Data collection (ATWD) will support future national collaborative work.</li> <li>In the 2021–22 Budget, the Australian Government provided \$5.8m to continue the ATWD, providing nationally consistent data on the teacher workforce including in RRR areas.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ongoing – nationally consistent data will assist in identifying opportunities and challenges to attracting, developing, supporting and retaining high-quality teachers.</li> </ul>
Recommendation 3: Ensure RRR contexts, challenges and opportunities are explicitly included in the selection, preparation, appointment and ongoing professional support of educational leaders.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>AITSL developed a spotlight publication detailing the challenges and opportunities for teachers in accessing high-quality professional learning in RRR contexts.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>AITSL has published the document <a href="#">Professional learning for RRR teachers</a> on its website.</li> </ul>
Recommendation 3: Ensure RRR contexts, challenges and opportunities are explicitly included in the selection, preparation, appointment and ongoing professional support of educational leaders.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In 2019, the Government committed \$7.5 million for Teach For Australia (TFA) to develop and pilot a new Future Leaders Program (FLP).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The FLP pilot is operating over four years (2021–2024) with 170 participants.</li> <li>In 2024, schools in WA, NT and QLD are participating in the program.</li> </ul>



Recommendations	Implementation	Status
<p>Recommendation 8: Improve opportunities for RRR schools to implement entrepreneurship in education through curriculum, teaching, system and cultural changes and building on good practice.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The then Australian Government committed \$2 million over three years (2019–2022) to expand the Country Education Partnership's Rural Inspire program. This program aims to encourage young people in rural communities to set their sights high, develop their motivation and increase their ability to choose and achieve positive career, life and learning goals.</li> <li>▪ In 2020 Rural Inspire expanded into New South Wales and South Australia, in 2021 to Queensland and the Northern Territory (with a focus on First Nations participants), and to WA and Tasmania during 2022.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The national expansion has been achieved, with the program having established links to the relevant education authorities in all participating jurisdictions.</li> </ul>

### Priority 3: Improving information and communications technology (ICT)

Recommendations	Implementation	Status
Recommendation 9: Improve ICT for schools.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The Australian Government's School Student Broadband Initiative is providing up to 30,000 families with no internet at home with free NBN to boost education opportunities and narrow the digital divide.</li> <li>▪ In-need families are nominated by partnering organisations such as schools, education authorities and charities/community organisations or can be assessed by contacting the National Referral Centre.</li> <li>▪ Free services are available across all NBN technologies including fixed-wireless and satellite.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ As of October 2024, over 45,000 vouchers have been issued and around 19,000 families have been connected to a free NBN service.</li> </ul>
Recommendation 10: Support RRR communities to implement innovative approaches to education delivery designed to improve education access and outcomes for students living in remote communities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ NBN Co continues to develop products to meet the needs of a wider range of users.</li> <li>▪ The Australian Government is investing \$2.4 billion so NBN Co can upgrade an additional 1.5 million premises from fibre to the node (FTTN) to enable access to full-fibre services by end of 2025.</li> <li>▪ This is in addition to the \$480 million provided to NBN Co to support an upgrade to the entire NBN Fixed Wireless and Satellite networks.</li> <li>▪ In the 2024–25 Budget, \$68 million was provided for programs to support First Nations digital inclusion, including in remote communities, based on recommendations from the First Nations Digital Inclusion Advisory Group's initial report.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Once this upgrade is complete around 90 per cent of fixed-line premises will be able to access speeds of up to 1 Gigabit per second.</li> </ul>

#### Priority 4: Enhancing transitions into and out of school

Recommendations	Implementation	Status
Recommendation 4: Ensure RRR children start school with a strong foundation for learning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The Preschool Reform Agreement is an Australian Government commitment to make \$2 billion available to support state and territory governments to deliver universal access to 15 hours of preschool a week to children in the year before full-time school.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>From 2022 to 2025, the Australian Government is providing funding through the Preschool Reform Agreement.</li> <li>The Australian Government and states and territories are working to deliver a reform agenda to ensure all children benefit from Commonwealth funding, lift preschool enrolment and attendance, and help understand the impact of preschool.</li> </ul>
Recommendation 4: Ensure RRR children start school with a strong foundation for learning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The Australian Government's Child Care Safety Net includes funding for the Connected Beginnings program, which works closely with First Nations communities to identify early childhood priorities for change, and to lift participation in quality and culturally appropriate early childhood services and programs to improve school readiness and developmental outcomes for children.</li> <li>Once expanded to 50 sites, it is anticipated that around 20 per cent of First Nations children will be living in a community with Connected Beginnings.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The Connected Beginnings program currently supports 48 First Nations communities. The Department of Education is on track to meet the Government's commitment of expanding the Connected Beginnings program nationally to 50 sites by 2025.</li> </ul>
Recommendation 5: Expand the availability, affordability and accessibility of high-quality work experience placements, VET, dual VET/university options and two-year associate degree programs for RRR students.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The Australian Government partnered with states and territories on the Fee-Free TAFE Skills Agreement to deliver 500,000 Fee Free TAFE and vocational education places from 2023 to 2026.</li> <li>Further information can be found on the DEWR website: <a href="#">Fee-Free TAFE – Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, Australian Government</a></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The Australian Government works with the states and territories to develop the implementation plans for the delivery of places over 2024 to 2026 as part of Fee-Free TAFE Tranche 2.</li> <li>Negotiations are currently underway with states and territories on the delivery arrangements for Fee-Free Construction, announced as part of the 2024–25 Budget.</li> </ul>

Recommendations	Implementation	Status
<p>Recommendation 6: Support RRR students to make successful transitions from school to university, training, employment and combinations of them.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, <a href="#">Explore Your Career   Your Career</a> includes a suite of digital resources and information supporting RRR students:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Publication of the School Leavers Information Kit (SLIK) supports informed decision making when leaving school; the SLIK has a dedicated booklet for Regional, Rural and Remote school leavers</li> <li>– The RRR card game supports educators and parents in RRR to start having conversations with younger school aged children about the world of work</li> <li>– The Australian Jobs Report (AJR) provides geographically diverse statistics on the workforce, industry, occupations and jobs</li> <li>– Course and registered training provider search allowing the users to enter their location and see their localised training options</li> <li>– Tailored and targeted information and articles advocating and promoting careers in RRR for students</li> </ul> </li> <li>▪ Your Career is the Governments trusted source of truth for careers information, providing a leadership role across states and territories for industry, occupation and financial support information for students and young people.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, <a href="#">Explore Your Career   Your Career</a> has ongoing information and resources supporting RRR students. These resources are updated regularly or through annual publications.</li> </ul>
<p>Recommendation 7: Encourage the philanthropic sector to play a greater role in raising achievements and improving opportunities for RRR students.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The Department of Education continues to undertake discussions with philanthropic organisations as appropriate.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Ongoing</li> </ul>

## Appendix D: Measures responding to the Napthine Review

### Forward funded to 2020–21 to 2023–24

In 2019, the Napthine Review made seven recommendations intended to strengthen regional, rural and remote (RRR) participation in VET and higher education against the high-level targets to halve the disparity in tertiary education attainment and participation between regional, rural and remote and metropolitan students by 2030. The Government announced a package of measures in response.

Implementation updates for measures responding to the Napthine Review have been provided by relevant department representatives.

Tertiary Access Payment		
Funding	Commencing date	Implementation and outcomes
\$177.8 million (over four years) for a payment of up to \$5,000 to encourage and assist regional and remote students to access tertiary study immediately following Year 12.	1 January 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>As of 31 December 2023, 9,737 payments have been made to eligible university, VET and Non University Higher Education Providers (NUHEP) students since the commencement of the program. This includes:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2,125 payments in 2021;</li> <li>3,896 payments in 2022,* and</li> <li>3,716 payments in 2023.</li> </ul> </li> <li>*Note 2022 granted payments are correct as of August 2023. Granted and rejected data may change if claims are assessed or reassessed in the following year.</li> <li>Of the 376 TAP recipients surveyed in the 2021 TAP program evaluation, the majority reported the TAP greatly assisted their relocation, with some indicating without it, the relocation would not have been possible.</li> <li>A future second stage evaluation of the TAP will consider the longer-term effects of the program including its impacts on access, participation and attainment.</li> </ul>

Increased Commonwealth Grant Scheme funding for regional university campuses		
Funding	Commencing date	Implementation and outcomes
\$146 million (over four years) to increase Commonwealth Grant Scheme funding for regional university campuses by 3.5% a year.	1 January 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Funding growth is provided for additional Commonwealth supported students based on the distribution of non-medical bachelor level enrolments across campuses and regionality:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3.5% at regional campuses</li> <li>2.5% at campuses in high-growth metropolitan areas</li> <li>1% at campuses in low-growth metropolitan areas.</li> </ul> </li> <li>Transitional arrangements apply over 2021 to 2023, with full growth rates applying from 2024.</li> </ul>

### Demand-driven places for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students from regional and remote areas

Funding	Commencing date	Implementation and outcomes
\$17.1 million (over four years) for demand-driven Commonwealth-supported places for First Nations students from regional and remote areas.	1 January 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Initial payments to universities commenced on 7 January 2021 and payments are revised based on the latest Commonwealth supported enrolment estimates of their regional and remote First Nations student load. This measure provided a total of \$48.1 million for approximately 4,046 EFTSL (equivalent full-time student load) for all regional and remote First Nations students at 38 Table A universities in 2023.</li> <li>This measure will be reviewed in 2024, however university estimates indicate demand may have been affected by COVID-19 travel restrictions and shutdowns, as it has for all other students.</li> </ul> <p><b>Priority Actions arising from the Australian Universities Accord Interim Report</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>One of the priority actions under the Accord Interim Report was to extend demand-driven funding to metropolitan First Nations students, meaning all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in Australia will be guaranteed a Commonwealth supported place at a Table A university of their choice (for bachelor level courses other than medicine), when accepted into their chosen course of study. This measure commenced on 1 January 2024.</li> </ul>

### Enhance and strengthen the Regional University Centres (RUC) program

Funding	Commencing date	Implementation and outcomes
\$21 million to establish up to eight additional RUCs (now called Regional University Study Hubs); and to strengthen the existing program.	From 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Establishment of up to 8 new Regional Hubs (Cohort 3) – following a competitive process in early 2022, 8 successful applicants were agreed: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Wheatbelt Region (Narrogin, York, Merredin, Wongan Hills), WA</li> <li>Kimberley Region (Broome), WA</li> <li>Cape York Region (Cooktown), QLD</li> <li>Tablelands Region (Atherton), QLD</li> <li>Port Lincoln, SA</li> <li>Roxby Downs, SA</li> <li>Mallee Region (Swan Hill), VIC</li> <li>Mount Isa, QLD.</li> </ul> </li> <li>All eight hubs are now operational.</li> <li>The Regional University Study Hubs Network was established in April 2021 as a centralised support network for all Regional Hubs. In August 2024 the Network hosted the biennial Regional University Study Hubs Symposium, bringing together representatives from all Regional Hubs for knowledge sharing, topical discussions and networking opportunities.</li> <li>A first stage evaluation of the Regional University Study Hubs program was completed in mid-2021, with a second stage planned for 2024–25.</li> <li>The partnerships research project completed in late 2021 led to hubs from Cohort 3 onwards having access to a specific stream of partnerships funding, instead of being able to direct a small number of Commonwealth Supported Places to university partners. Three of the eight Cohort 3 hubs have now applied for and received this funding.</li> <li>In May 2024 (latest full data collection), almost 4400 students were being supported by the 33 Regional University Study Hubs in operation at that time.</li> </ul> <p><b>Priority Actions arising from the Australian Universities Accord Interim Report</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>On 18 July 2023, in response to the first priority action of the Australian Universities Accord Interim Report, the Hon Jason Clare MP, Minister for Education, announced \$66.9 million to double the number of University Study Hubs, including expanding the concept to the outer suburbs of major cities for the first time.</li> <li>Up to 20 additional Regional University Study Hubs, are to be established through two streams: On 25 March 2024, Minister Clare announced 12 Regional University Study Hubs funded in the first stream, including funding to support two existing Country Universities Centres in New South Wales.</li> <li>The 12 newly funded hubs took the total number of Hubs to 46, building on the 34 hubs previously funded.</li> <li>The application round to establish up to 10 Regional Hubs in the second stream opened on 21 August 2024, with applications closing on 18 October 2024. Successful applicants are expected to be announced in early 2025. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In this funding round, as a trial, universities are eligible to apply for funding to establish a Regional Hub in collaboration with a regional or remote community.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

### Regional Research Collaboration (RRC) program

Funding	Commencing date	Implementation and outcomes
\$87.3 million to enhance the research collaboration capacity of regional universities.	From 2021 Program closed on 13 December 2023.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Six projects were funded under round 1 of RRC from September 2021, totalling \$19.9 million.</li> <li>Five projects were funded under round 2 of RRC from April 2022, totalling \$19.5 million.</li> </ul>

### Regional Partnerships Project Pool Program (RPPPP)

Funding	Commencing date	Implementation and outcomes
\$7.2 million (over four years) for the Regional Partnerships Project Pool Program to support universities and Hubs to deliver higher education outreach initiatives to enable the aspiration of students in regional and remote Australia.	From 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Program is using a two-phase process to co-design (Phase 1) and deliver (Phase 2) targeted outreach initiatives in regional and remote Australia.</li> <li>Six Phase 1 projects commenced in August 2022, with total funding of \$704,628 awarded. The 6 project teams comprise 21 Hubs and 33 universities working with local communities across Australia.</li> <li>Two successful Phase 2 projects were awarded a further total of \$6.5 million and commenced delivery in July 2023.               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The <b>Northern Territory Youth Engagement in Allied Health (YEAH!)</b> project, led by Flinders University, will support regional and remote First Nations youth in the NT to consider an allied health higher education pathway.</li> <li>The <b>Eastern Australia Regional University Centre Partnership</b> project, led by University of Technology Sydney, will work with over 30 Hubs and universities to deliver targeted outreach projects to communities across QLD, NSW and VIC.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

### Expansion of the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP)

Funding	Commencing date	Implementation and outcomes
<p>No additional funding.</p> <p>Existing funding of \$140.1 million is indexed each year ongoing.</p> <p>\$157.1 million was available in 2024.</p>	1 January 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>From 1 January 2021, the HEPPP was expanded to support students from regional and remote areas and Indigenous students alongside those from low SES backgrounds. Universities are allocated HEPPP funds based on their proportion share of students from each of the three equity cohorts.</li> <li>Following a four-year transition, the 2024 allocation will be the first calculated under the fully expanded funding formula. From 2024, the formula will allocate 45% of funds based on low SES student enrolments, 45% based on regional and remote student enrolments and 10% based on First Nations student enrolments.</li> </ul>



Regional Education Commissioner		
Funding	Commencing date	Implementation and outcomes
\$6 million to establish and support a Regional Education Commissioner to oversee implementation of the Napthine Review response, and report to the Government on regional education.	13 December 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Annual workplan for 2024 provided to the Minister for Education in February 2024.</li> <li>Third annual report to Government submitted November 2024.</li> </ul> <p><b>Stakeholder engagement</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In 2024 reporting period, engaged with more than 150 stakeholders from regional, rural and remote communities; early childhood; schools and tertiary education providers; peak bodies; regional employers, as well as relevant departmental representatives and all levels of government (see Appendix A 2024 Annual Report).</li> <li>Convened roundtable of First Nations experts in regional, rural and remote education (September 2024).</li> </ul> <p><b>Commissioned projects</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Commissioned an external evaluation of measures implemented in response to the Napthine Review (report delivered October 2024).</li> <li>Commissioned research project to investigate best-practice methods of retaining RRR students to Year 12 (report delivered December 2023).</li> </ul> <p><b>Department of Education engagement</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Member of department's Regional, Rural and Remote Higher Education stakeholder roundtable.</li> <li>Regional University Study Hubs Assessment Panel member (Rounds 4 and 5 in 2024).</li> <li>Advice provided to Department of Education for the development of the Commonwealth Regional Scholarship Program evaluation.</li> </ul> <p><b>Advocacy and submissions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Member of the Murray-Darling Medical School Network Evaluation Expert Reference Group.</li> <li>Joint publication with Scottish Commissioner for Fair Access, Professor John McKendrick.</li> <li>Submissions made to:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Jobs and Skills Australia Early Childhood Education and Care Workforce Capacity Study (18 December 2023)</li> <li>Strategic Review of Australian Apprenticeship Incentive System (16 May 2024)</li> <li>Jobs and Skills Australia Food Supply Chain Capacity Study (31 May 2024)</li> <li>Western Australia Pathways to Post-School Success – Consultation on the Draft Final Report (16 August 2024)</li> <li>Productivity Commission Inquiry Draft Report (6 February 2024).</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

### Improvements to Fares Allowance

Funding	Commencing date	Implementation and outcomes
<p>\$0.7 million for improvements to Fares Allowance, administered through Services Australia.</p>	<p>1 January 2021</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ From 1 January 2021, the initial waiting period to claim Fares Allowance was reduced from 6 months to 3 months. This means eligible students can access Fares Allowance for the mid-year break in their first year of study.</li> <li>▪ The total amount paid to Austudy and Youth Allowance students was approximately:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– \$97,000 as of August 2024</li> <li>– \$86,740 as of August 2023</li> <li>– \$86,721 as of August 2022</li> <li>– \$91,383 as of August 2021.</li> </ul> </li> <li>▪ These figures do not include ABSTUDY Fares Allowance expenditure.</li> <li>▪ Data is not available on the number of students who have received payments .</li> <li>▪ Administered by Services Australia, with policy owned by the Department of Social Services.</li> </ul>

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# GLOSSARY



**Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF)** is the national policy guide for regulated qualifications in the Australian education and training system. Higher education and VET qualifications are described in the AQF, which consists of ten qualification levels, corresponding to 17 qualification types, including the Senior Secondary Certificate of Education, which is not among the ten levels. AQF levels give an indication of the relative complexity, breadth and depth of achievement and autonomy required to demonstrate competency, and duration to achieve that competency (known as 'volume of learning'). The AQF ensures a common national understanding, recognition and consistency of regulated qualifications.

**Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS)** is a classification of Australia into statistical areas based on population, as defined by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). It is a social geography, developed to reflect the location of people and communities. In this report, Remoteness Areas are used to distinguish between regions.

**Australian Universities Accord (Accord)** is a review of Australia's higher education system, led by an independent expert panel and initiated in 2022. The Accord is considering a range of issues including access and opportunity, investment and affordability, quality and sustainability, and accountability and community, to provide a long-term plan for higher education in Australia. The Accord Panel delivered a final report to Government in December 2023.

**Australian University** or 'university' refer to a registered higher education provider in the 'Australian University' provider category of the Higher Education Standards Framework, which sets out the standards all Australian higher education providers are required to meet to continue to deliver higher education courses in Australia (see 'Australian Universities Accord', 'higher education', 'RTO', 'VET', 'tertiary education').

**Census Date** is the last date a student can finalise or withdraw from any units of study, finalise residency status, suspend studies or discontinue their course, without it affecting grades or making a student financially liable for units of study.

**Commonwealth Supported Places (CSPs)** are places at a university or higher education provider where the Australian Government pays part of the student's fees. This part is a subsidy, not a loan, and the student is not required to pay it back. This subsidy does not cover the entire cost of the student's study. The remaining portion is called the 'student contribution amount', which the student is liable for.

**Halsey Review** is the *Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education* released in 2018, conducted by Emeritus Professor John Halsey.

**Higher Education** in Australia refers to awards spanning Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) levels 5–10, which include: diplomas (5); advanced diplomas (6); associate degrees (6); undergraduate degrees (a higher education qualification of six months duration covered by an existing higher education qualification at levels 5, 6, or 7); bachelor degrees (7) including honours (8); graduate certificates (8); graduate diplomas (8); masters degrees (9); doctoral degrees (10); and higher doctoral degrees (10). Higher Education providers are regulated by the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) (see 'tertiary education', 'Australian Universities').

**Higher Education Loan Program (HELP)** provides a financial loan to eligible students to pay student contributions or tuition fees from a university or other higher education provider. Students repay this loan through the Australian tax system, indexed to the cost of living, once they earn above the compulsory repayment threshold. The rate of repayment is dependent on the student's income.

**Initial Teacher Education (ITE)** is a pre-service, compulsory qualification to equip graduate teachers with the necessary knowledge, skills and dispositions to start their teaching career in any Australian school.

**Jobs and Skills Australia** is an agency announced in July 2022 and confirmed in the October 2022 budget. The agency's remit includes workforce planning and developing closer partnerships with state and territory governments, unions, industry and education providers to help Australia meet its present and future skills needs.

**Literacy and Numeracy Test for Initial Teacher Education (LANTITE)** is a computer-based test to measure Initial Teacher Education students' literacy and numeracy skills.

**Metropolitan** refers to those urban area that are classified as Major Cities as defined by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) under the ASGS Remoteness Area (ASGS-RA).

**National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN)** is an annual, nationwide assessment for students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 to allow parents/carers and educators to compare student progression in literacy and numeracy over time and against national standards.

**National Broadband Network (NBN)** is a publicly owned government enterprise tasked with designing, building and operating a wholesale broadband access network for Australia.

**National School Reform Agreement** is a joint agreement between the Commonwealth, States and Territories to lift student outcomes across Australian schools through agreed national objectives, outcomes and measures.

**Napthine Review** is the *National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy* chaired by the Hon Dr Denis Napthine and delivered in 2019, which focused on improving tertiary education participation and outcomes for students from regional, rural and remote areas.

**Regional** is used as a broad term for nonmetropolitan areas of Australia, also referred to collectively as **regional, rural and remote** areas. Where the terms 'inner regional', 'outer regional', 'remote', 'very remote' and 'major cities' are used, they generally correspond to the five classes of remoteness under the ASGS-RA, as defined by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) based on relative access to services. While many people and communities identify as rural, the term is not explicitly defined and does not correspond to any specific class of area within the ASGS.

**Regional University Study Hubs** (formerly Regional University Centres), also known as RUSHs, provide facilities for the use of regional, rural and remote students to study tertiary courses delivered by distance. Hubs provide local infrastructure including study spaces and internet access, administrative and academic support services, and student support services. Hubs are not registered higher education providers and cannot award higher education qualifications.

**Registered Training Organisations (RTO)** deliver and assess nationally recognised training in the VET sector, issue nationally recognised qualifications and statements of attainment, and receive government funding to provide subsidised VET services (see 'tertiary education', 'TAFE', 'VET').

**Schooling Resourcing Standard** is an estimate of how much total public funding a school needs to meet its students' educational needs. It is based on recommendations made in the 2011 Review of Funding for Schooling led by David Gonski AC. It is made up of a base amount and up to 6 needs-based loadings. The Department of Education calculates an SRS for each school every year by adding the base amount and loadings it has calculated for the school using the formulas in the Australian Education Act 2013. The SRS is increased each year by the SRS indexation factor.

**Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM)** are collectively referred to as 'STEM'.

**Socio-economic status (SES)** is the social and economic position of an individual, group, community or region. Common measures include income, consumption, wealth, education and employment.

**Technical and Further Education (TAFE)** is a government-run system of tertiary education providers providing Vocational Education and Training (VET). VET teaches specific skills for particular industries and workplaces, as opposed to higher education, which focuses on teaching conceptual knowledge and critical thinking (see 'tertiary education', 'RTO', and 'VET').

**Tertiary education** refers to all vocational education and training (VET) and higher education in Australia. Higher education and VET qualifications are described in the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF), the national policy guide for regulated qualifications in the Australian education and training system. Many providers are dual-sector providers, offering qualifications in both VET and higher education, including most TAFEs and a number of universities (see 'Australian Universities', 'Higher Education', 'RTO', 'TAFE' and 'VET').

**Vocational Education and Training (VET)** refers to the training and work-ready qualifications related to occupational skills, trades and competencies. The VET sector recognises AQF qualification levels 1–6 and 8 (Certificates I–IV, Diploma (5), Advanced Diploma (6), Graduate Certificate and Graduate Diploma (8)). The VET sector is regulated by the Australian Skills Qualification Agency (ASQA) (see 'tertiary education', 'RTO' and 'TAFE').

**VET Delivered to Secondary Students (VETDSS)** refers to programs delivered as part of the secondary education system which provide students with the opportunity to engage in vocational learning and work towards attaining a nationally recognised VET qualification as part of their secondary study.



