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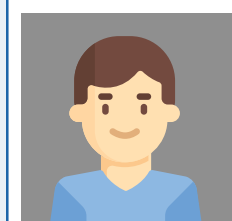
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Society for the Provision of Education in Rural Australia Submission to consultation on the Accord Interim Report

The Society for the Provision of Education in Rural Australia (SPERA) extends its appreciation for the Australian Universities Accord Interim Report’s emphasis on “growth for skills through greater equity.” As the representative body for stakeholders spanning regional, rural, and remote (RRR) Australia, including universities, community organisations, schools, and community champions, we embrace this renewed commitment with great enthusiasm. It is refreshing to see a shift in emphasis from equity students being a “nice to have” to a “have to have” in the higher education system if Australia is to meet its skilled workforce needs for the future.

Integral to our dedication to amplifying the voices of RRR students, we thoughtfully incorporated six authentic case studies into our original submission. These poignant narratives were selected to shed light on the substantial challenges RRR people encounter in their pursuit of higher education. This further underscores the critical significance of tailored and targeted support to nurture their aspirations.

While acknowledging the promising trajectory outlined in the interim report, it is paramount to recognise that intent alone should only constitute the initial phase.



Would-be Relocator

Name: John

Age: 18

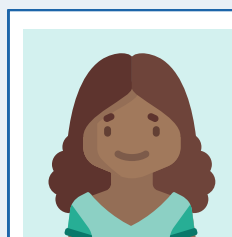
Situation: John is 18 and just finished high-school in outer regional NSW. He is from a single-parent family and has 2 siblings. John works part time to assist his mum with family expenses.

Education: John worked hard at school to achieve an ATAR of 80 and wants to study Finance. He’s the first person in his family to want to go to university. He’d also like to spend time in a larger metropolitan area to access different work opportunities and see what’s “out there”.

He’s currently enrolled in a local regional campus course to “learn the ropes” of university. John lacks confidence in his academic abilities and finds the university language confusing. He often seeks learning development and navigational support from his local campus.

Challenges: Even with Centrelink and TAP support, John and his mum can’t currently afford the costs involved in moving away for university whilst helping support his two siblings. So John’s decided to work at home whilst studying locally to save up to move away in a year or so and hopefully get full credit for the subjects he’s doing at his current regional campus. They don’t have a Finance major available but he’s doing generalist business subjects to get started.

Goals: John wants to work in a Finance company, drive a nice car, buy a house and have a family of his own one day. He’s keen to help other regional and single parent families manage money better to get ahead.



Second Chancer

Name: Jessica

Age: 21

Situation: Jessica was a relocater but moving to the metropolitan area was a struggle straight from school. She thought living with her friends in the big city would be fun but, she was always short of money, was missing her family, and, needing to work to support herself, found she was slipping behind with her studies. She returned home after the first year.

Education: Jessica had always been a good student at school, achieved an ATAR score of 78 and managed to complete 6 of the 8 units she enrolled in successfully. Failing a couple of units has made her doubt her ability.

Challenges: Jessica was disillusioned when returning to her home town and picked up hospitality work. She thought the university dream was over because of a lack of local physical resources and online course choices. She’s been working on her mental health but is still lacking confidence in her ability to study online successfully on her own.

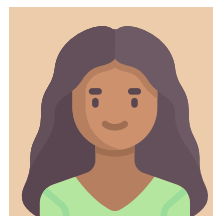
Goals: Jessica has received credit from her previous study and has now enrolled in an online psychology degree as she knows there is a desperate need for mental health services in her town. She cares and wants to be able to make a vital contribution to her regional community.

As articulated in our previous submission, RRR students encounter a myriad of obstacles on their journey to success, barriers of access range from geographical remoteness to academic preparedness and financial limitations. We therefore have identified the following key priorities detailed in the interim report as being the most important to address for RRR students:

1. Universal Learning Entitlement (pages 9 and 43) - With a priority element of this being a guaranteeing of Commonwealth supported funding for all equity students. SPERA strongly advocated for this measure as part of its initial recommendation to restore demand-driven funding for equity students. The effectiveness of the concept of "growth for skills through greater equity" would likely remain limited without the inclusion of this element. Incorporating robust accountability measures, this action will be essential in guiding university growth strategies to prioritise the participation, retention, and successful completion of equity students.

2. Easing the financial burden (page 11) - SPERA endorses the Accord's initiatives aimed at tackling the escalating financial pressures faced by students due to their cost of living, and at establishing remuneration for mandatory work placements. Among our previous recommendations is the proposal for enabling students from RRR areas to conduct placements within their local community, a measure intended to mitigate these expenses. The eligibility criteria, timeframes, and rates pertaining to youth allowance and Austudy need careful consideration within the framework of this Accord. Such considerations are vital as the accessibility of education remains a distant goal for equity students if they are unable to afford their basic living expenses during their academic pursuits. It is paramount that feasible strategies are devised to overcome these challenges and realise the set targets.

3. Increasing access to preparatory programs (page 11) - Evidence strongly supports the effectiveness of preparatory programs in



First Nations Remote Student

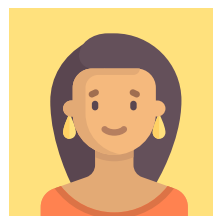
Name: Eloise
Age: 23

Situation: Eloise is a First Nations regional person raising two young children (9 months and 6 years) with the support of an extended family network. Her financial situation is stretched as she's receiving parenting payment (single) and family tax benefit.

Education: Eloise completed Year 11 and after the birth of her first child, studied through a Certificate III and Certificate IV in Community Services at the local TAFE which has given her entry into an online Bachelor of Social Work. This course requires attendance at residential schools interstate and long unpaid practical placements in the third and fourth years of the course.

Challenges: Not everyone in Eloise's family is supportive of her going back to study and she feels she is constantly straddling the divide between family and cultural expectations, and the rigid demands of the university. Although she has studied at TAFE, university study is providing something very different. She is worried about how she will manage attending the residential school financially and leaving the children to do so.

Goals: Eloise was working part time in community services before the birth of her second child and aspires to a professional career in this sector as a Social Worker. She wants to support her community on Country and be a positive role model for her children and family.



Mature Age Career Change

Name: Sarah
Age: 36

Situation: Sarah has three children, all under the age of 10. She is a devoted mother and takes great pride in raising her children to be kind, compassionate, and respectful individuals. She has a supportive husband who works full-time, but they struggle to make ends meet.

Education: Sarah has always had a passion for helping others, and after years of working in aged care, she has decided to study to become a nurse. She is currently enrolled in a part-time Bachelor of Nursing through an online educational institution that requires her to travel long distances for placements and residential schools as a requirement of her course.

Challenges: Sarah's biggest challenge is balancing her responsibilities as a mother, wife, part-time worker, and student. There is significant strain on her finances and family to meet her course requirements. She often feels overwhelmed and exhausted, but she is determined to succeed and provide a better life for her family. Additionally, living in a rural area poses challenges with access to resources and opportunities.

Goals: Sarah's primary goal is to complete her nursing degree and start working as a registered nurse. She hopes to provide a better life for her family and contribute to her community's healthcare needs. Additionally, she wants to set an example for her children and show them the value of hard work and perseverance.

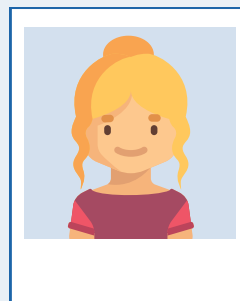
facilitating enrolment, easing transition, and enhancing retention. What's clear is that we require a greater presence of these programs throughout rural Australia. Building upon SPERA's earlier recommendations, it's imperative to establish a uniform approach to enabling programs. This would ensure that regardless of the university they select, students can have confidence in finding a pathway for admission.

4. Encouraging students from under-represented groups to aspire to higher education and fulfil their potential (page 11) – Increased funding for Widening Participation programs in regional areas, which are community-led and partnered with regional industry will be key. Incentivise online learning by universities so that RRR students can access a full range of courses in their entirety. SPERA has also recommended fostering collaboration between Higher Education institutions (including RUCs), schools, Vocational Education and Training providers and community which can help raise aspiration in underrepresented groups while also meeting regional workforce demand.

5. Exploring the potential for a needs-based funding model (page 11) - SPERA concurs there are significant additional costs involved in educating students from equity groups and the ability to offer programs and resources in rural areas is highly dependent upon adequate funding. If loadings are applied in a needs based funding model, they too must not be capped.

In conclusion, SPERA remains committed to continued consultation and collaboration, ensuring the Accord's final recommendations comprehensively address the distinct challenges encountered by RRR students.

Kind regards
SPERA Executive Committee



Young Stayer

Name: Amy
Age: 19

Situation: Amy has always wanted to be a teacher. She lives independently in a small regional town as there was violence in her family home growing up. She struggles to pay the bills for the small one-bedroom apartment she shares with a friend. Amy works 50 hours a week at a local café and gets some Centrelink support.

Education: Amy's family situation affected her ability to do well at high school and she did not get an ATAR. She enrolled in a local bridging program after school that was CSP funded to gain entry to university. She is now studying a Bachelor of Arts full time at a local regional campus with a view to do a Master of Secondary Teaching afterwards.

Challenges: : Amy does not have access to HELP/HECS as she is a permanent resident and she is constantly worried about paying the fees each semester. She applies for every scholarship she can and has had some success to help pay her university fees. She is frustrated because everyone in her community tells her they are desperate for teachers, but it will take her 5 years and over \$50,000 to complete her degree, whilst her friend Alison is getting a Nursing degree within 3 years and for free, because she lives just down the road over the Victorian border.

Goals: Amy wants to be a high school teacher in a rural area and help kids so they don't have to struggle like she did.



The Latent Student

Name: Ken
Age: 32

Situation: Ken is an electrician. He has lived in his home town all his life and is married with two school aged children. He's been working in a drive in drive out mining role for the past 3 years so financially they are doing well but Ken is getting sick of being away and no longer really satisfied with his career. He does enjoy helping some of the new apprentices learn their trade.

Education: Ken has completed an electrical apprenticeship. He's never heard of a bridging program or an online teaching degree.

Challenges: Ken thinks perhaps he could be a great teacher but he's probably not smart enough seeing as he didn't finish Year 12 and there's no university in town anyway. He would never consider relocating as this is his home, his whole extended family and friend network is here and the kids are happy in their school. He doesn't even think to explore options online.

Opportunity: Ken's potential could be untapped to help the teacher crisis in his regional town. With an on the ground presence building aspiration and offering support to embark on a bridging program, Ken could, and would undertake study.