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## **Society for the Provision of Education in Rural Australia Submission to the Australian Universities Accord**

The Society for the Provision of Education in Rural Australia (SPERA) is an organisation that brings together members from various sectors of Regional, Rural, Remote (RRR) communities across Australia. Our members include representatives from universities, community organisations, schools, academic researchers, and community champions who are dedicated to improving the education opportunities for those living in regional, rural, and remote areas of Australia.

As an organisation, SPERA are deeply committed to promoting and supporting education in RRR Australia. We believe that education is critical for social and economic development, and advocate for policies and initiatives that will improve access to education and training for people living in these areas.

Our submission to the Australian Universities Accord is focused on ***Creating Opportunities for All Australians***, with a particular emphasis on what is relevant for RRR Australia. We have carefully considered the questions posed in the discussion paper and have provided recommendations that we believe will help to address the unique challenges faced by RRR communities in accessing higher education.

SPERA believe that by working together with universities, governments, and other stakeholders, we can create a more equitable and inclusive system that will benefit all, regardless of where they live. Our submission outlines a number of specific recommendations that SPERA believe will help to achieve this goal.

### **Guiding Principles**

The fact that RRR students are currently participating in higher education at less than half the rate of metropolitan Australia is a significant issue that needs to be addressed (Halsey, 2018; Commonwealth of Australia, 2019; Productivity Commission 2019). This persistent inequity limits the potential of many talented people living in regional, rural, and remote areas of Australia.

In response to this issue, SPERA is advocating for four guiding principles that, if supported in policy, will enable larger cohorts of RRR students to aspire to, access and complete higher education in the regions. These principles have been developed based on the experiences and insights of our members, who work directly with students in RRR communities.

**1. Widening participation and outreach programs:** Widening participation and outreach programs aim to inspire and motivate all school students in regional, rural, and remote (RRR) areas of Australia to reach their full potential. These programs should be available to all students regardless of their location and socio-economic background. Widening participation and outreach programs can include career counselling, mentorship, exposure to higher education and career opportunities, and information about scholarship programs. By providing access to these opportunities, students can set higher goals and strive for greater academic and professional achievements.



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**2. Free, place-based universally designed enabling programs:** Free, place-based universally designed enabling programs provide students in RRR communities with the necessary skills, knowledge, and support to access multiple institutions of higher education, not just one university. These programs should be designed to be flexible, adaptable, and responsive to the specific needs of the local community. Moreover, these programs can offer vocational credit, building students' confidence and capacity to succeed in their chosen fields. By providing students with the tools and resources to access higher education, we can empower them to pursue their dreams, improve their lives, and contribute to the development of their communities.

**3. Place-based local higher education support:** Place-based local higher education support provides students in RRR communities with access to higher education in their local area. These support models can include Regional University Centre models, regional university campus models, local library, school, and community-based HE support models. These models are designed to provide students with access to quality education and support services in their local area. By providing local higher education support, we can ensure that students in RRR communities have the same opportunities as those in urban areas.

**4. Community-led and owned:** Community-led and owned solutions acknowledge that a one-size-fits-all approach does not work across Australia. Local communities are best placed to understand their own needs and develop solutions that are tailored to their unique circumstances. Government should fund community-based solutions through partnerships with local communities, including support services, students, local government, and industry. By empowering local communities to take ownership of the solutions, we can ensure that they are sustainable, responsive, and effective in meeting the needs of RRR communities.

## RRR Student Case Studies

As part of our submission to the Australian Universities Accord, we have included six examples of real higher education (HE) students from RRR areas. These examples are based on real students, but their names and situations have been changed to protect their privacy.

SPERA believe that human stories are powerful because they provide a window into the challenges faced by students in RRR communities. We do not intend these examples to lead to generalisations, rather they show that every student's experience is unique to their personal situation and there is no one-size-fits-all model for supporting students from RRR areas.

The six examples we have included in our submission represent many of the students that we work with every day in our communities. These students face a range of challenges in accessing and succeeding in higher education, including financial constraints, limited access to resources and support services, and geographical isolation.

Through these examples, SPERA hope to highlight the very real challenges that students from RRR areas face in pursuing higher education and the importance of providing targeted support to help them achieve their goals. SPERA believe that by sharing these stories we can raise awareness about the unique challenges faced by students in RRR communities and inspire policymakers, universities, and other stakeholders to take action to address these challenges.



## 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

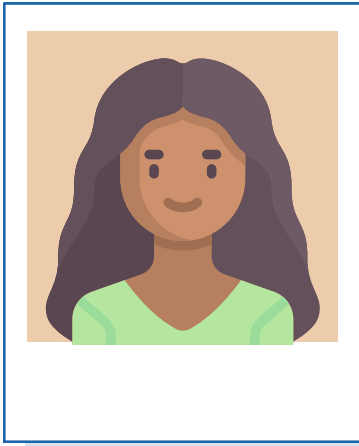
Age: 21

**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.



## First Nations Remote Student

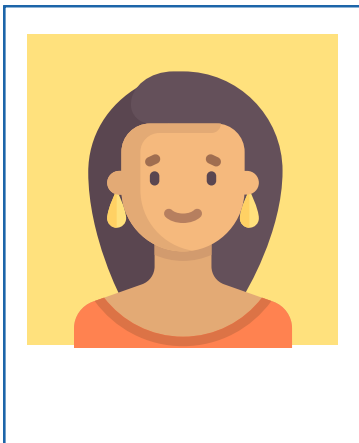
Name: Eloise  
Age: 23

**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

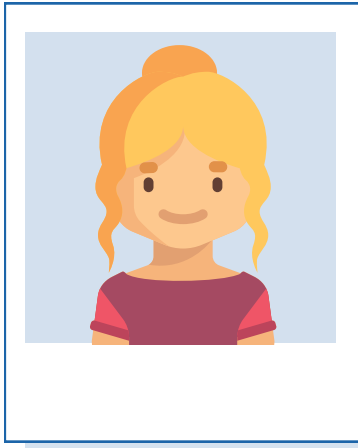
Name: Sarah  
Age: 36

**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.



## 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.

## SPERA Recommendations

SPERA reiterates its recommendation in its original submission to the Accord's Terms of Reference:

- Reinstatement Demand Driven Funding (DDF) for equity students.
- Redesign Widening Participation for regional equity.
- Incentivise online learning by universities.
- Alter the Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ITAS) to allow community organisations to access funding to support First Nations students on Country and/or wherever they are located.
- Allow regional students to complete placements locally.
- Standardise Enabling Programs and Alternative Pathways.
- Foster collaboration among higher education providers, schools, VET, and local community organisations.
- Expand Regional University Centres program.
- Develop communities of practice for online students.
- Provide incentives for international students to study and work in regional areas..
- Simplify scholarship and incentive schemes.




*Questions 28: What is needed to increase the number of people from under-represented groups applying to and prepared for higher education, both from school and from other pathways?*

Recommendations	RRR Student impact
Expand the Regional Partnerships Project Pool Program (RPPPP) (which has allowed local communities to lead their own outreach programs in partnership with universities)	
Review the 'Partnerships' component of HEPPP to explore how community-based organisations can be better included	
Include Regional University Centres as eligible for HEPPP/IRLSAF funding. (RUCs are already facilitating aspiration and preparatory activities and are well positioned to continue acting as the lynchpin between communities and universities).	
Development of national standards on enabling programs to ensure institutional transferability and/or a national or state-based alternative assessment framework and university entry program	
Incentivise partnerships between universities, schools, VET, and community groups to ensure rural communities have seamless access to lifelong learning	
Develop a national approach to pathways education between school and post-secondary providers	





*Question 29: What changes in provider practices and offerings are necessary to ensure all potential students can succeed in their chosen area of study?*

*Question 32: How can best practice learning and teaching for students from under-represented groups be embedded across the higher education system, including the use of remote learning?*



Recommendations	RRR Student impact
Incentivise universities to continue with online and blended models of learning to maintain and expand access to higher education for people RRR Australia.	
Ongoing funding and expansion of the Regional University Centre program in its current form, and exploration of low-population models that incorporate vocational training within smaller RUCs.	
Incentivise libraries, regional university campuses and vocational education providers to provide study support and communities of practice for online students in their own communities, regardless of their home institution (in communities where there is not access to an RUC).	

*Question 30: How can governments, institutions and employers assist students, widen opportunities and remove barriers to higher education?*

*Question 31: How can the costs of participation, including living expenses, be most effectively alleviated?*

Recommendations	RRR Student impact
Review financial support and incentive schemes for regional students to simplify the application process and make more students eligible.	
Create requirements that ensure universities must allow regional students to complete their placements in their local community if they choose	

*Question 33: What changes to funding and regulatory settings would enable providers to better support students from under-represented groups in higher education?*

Recommendations	RRR Student impact
Reintroduce Demand Driven Funding for targeted equity groups alongside a review of retention targets for universities	
Alter the Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ITAS) to allow community organisations to access funding to support First Nations students on Country and/or wherever they are located.	

The submission SPERA have prepared for the Australian Universities Accord has been developed by three of the SPERA Executives who are front-line RRR higher education support managers. These managers have a combined experience of over 60 years working in RRR Australia in both industry and higher education roles.

Natalie Nelmes is the Director of the original Regional University Centre (RUC) Geraldton Universities Centre (GUC). Developing a Campus Model RUC, Natalie has been responsible for overseeing the delivery of higher education courses in a blended mode, along with support services to students in the Mid West of WA on behalf of partner universities. Natalie is the Chair of RUC Network Advisory Committee and has worked in the RRR education sector for 14 years.

Danielle Keenan is the Director of Student Services for the RUC Country Universities Centre (CUC) Model. In this role, she has been responsible for overseeing the delivery of student services to students in RRR areas across Eastern Australia. Danielle has extensive experience in supporting students from diverse backgrounds and has a deep understanding of the challenges faced by students in RRR communities.

Samantha Avitaia is the UOW Bega Campus Manager and has experience working with the Regional University Campus Model. In this role, she has been responsible for overseeing the multi-modal delivery of higher education courses, community outreach and support services to students in the Bega Valley and Gippsland cross-border areas. Samantha brings a wealth of knowledge and experience to the submission, having worked in the RRR education sector for 25 years.

Overall, the experience and expertise of these three RRR managers are critical to the development of this submission. Their unique perspectives and insights have helped to inform our recommendations and ensure that they are practical, feasible, and responsive to the needs of RRR communities. We are grateful for their contributions and believe that their knowledge and experience will help to make a significant difference in improving access to higher education for people living in regional, rural, and remote areas of Australia.

Kind Regards,

Samantha Avitaia



Danielle Keenan



Natalie Nelmes