Extracts from the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education presented to the Australian Government, 31 January 2018.

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Purpose and framing

Access to high quality education is essential so young people can acquire the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values to enjoy life and successfully transition to further study, employment and enterprise. Education is central to them being able to participate fully in a dynamic and increasingly complex world; it is critical for developing and nurturing human agency.

The key challenge for regional, rural and remote education is ensuring, regardless of location or circumstances, that every young person has access to high quality schooling and opportunities.

The Review was tasked to:

- consider the key issues, challenges and barriers that impact on the learning outcomes of regional, rural and remote students

- identify innovative and fresh approaches to support improved access and achievement of these students in school and in their transition to further study, training and employment.

In addition to the aims and terms of reference, five convictions I developed about the importance of regional, rural and remote communities, learning and ways and means of driving improvements also shaped the Review. They are:

- vibrant and productive rural communities are integral to Australia's sustainability and prosperity—socially, economically and environmentally

- focussing on ideas and options for re-thinking and reframing education in regional, rural and remote areas is likely to be more productive than simply concentrating on 'the problems'

- student achievements and beyond-school opportunities are shaped by a diverse blend of in-school and community and home factors, as well as interactions between them—context and relationships are *always* important

- government and departmental/sector policy settings are very significant in developing possibilities for change together with the work of parents and communities

- improvement in education is achieved by exploring how existing resources can be used more effectively, not just by allocating more of them.

Learning

In practice, the factors that impact on learning and opportunities do not exist as discrete entities. Rather it is the way they come together and are 'brought to life' that shapes the learning, growth and nurturing of students from their early years through to school graduation and beyond.

Bringing curriculum to life in ways that deeply engage students together with authentic, valid and reliable assessment is a major challenge for education in RRR contexts.

This is because at the heart of RRR education is a critical question about its purpose, and as a student might ask, 'am I learning so I can leave my community, am I learning so I can stay locally, or am I learning so I have a real choice about what I do?'

As well, how a school uses curriculum and assessment to engage and motivate students has a great impact on their learning and their achievements and post school pathways.

And, hopefulness is also at the heart of building and nurturing students' aspirations and expectations.

Transition

Transitioning from school to further study, training, employment or combinations of these, is a major event for a young person and their family. For many who live in rural, regional and remote areas, this stage of life can be particularly challenging (as well as highly rewarding) because it often involves having to move away from home, family, friends and the familiarity and support of a community.

While there has been growth in the number of people from regional and remote areas undertaking an undergraduate degree over the last decade, they remain underrepresented in higher education.

Fundamental to pursuing and realising opportunities beyond school is having access to and then being able to effectively use a suite of resources to turn aspirations and interests into reality.

Broadly there are two kinds of resources that are particularly important for regional, rural and remote young people and making decisions about their futures. They can be referred to as soft and hard resources. Soft resources include those which focus on raising aspirations, relationships, networks, values, and reasons for hope.

Hard resources are usually of a more quantifiable kind like money and allowances, entry scores for university and training programs, accommodation, availability of part-time work and transport logistics.

The financial burden of moving away from home can be an impediment to regional, rural and remote students choosing to undertake further study or training, or even successfully completing their studies.

The financial costs associated with relocating include start-up expenses for relocation; the costs of living (such as rent and food); the direct costs of education or training (such as

tuition fees, textbooks and computer); the cost of traveling home during semester breaks; and the opportunity cost of forgone income while studying.

As well as financial costs, the social costs associated with relocating away from networks of family and friends can be significant, particularly for young school leavers.

Another key practical matter facing regional, rural and remote students is high rental prices for on-campus accommodation which can also be hard to obtain due to high demand. These students also have difficulty in the private rental market due to their age and lack of rental history.

Building capacities in RRR contexts

In 2004 the Civil Renewal Unit in the United Kingdom's Home Office Communities Group published a report titled *Firm Foundations: The Government's Framework for Community Capacity Building.* The report introduced the concept of anchor organisations and how vital they are for community capacity building and, over time, helping to turn around decline and stagnation. Anchor organisations are what their name implies—something solid and grounded, 'here for the long haul' with sufficient presence, respect, and openness to working in partnership with others to grow and sustain worthwhile futures for individuals and communities.

In many locations throughout RRR Australia, the concept of anchor organisations could be explored as a way to create new and sustainable opportunities. The range of anchor type organisations in RRR locations is still quite extensive: schools, regional universities and hubs, TAFE and other registered training organisations, regional development bodies, local businesses and industries, citizen interest groups, health services, philanthropy and others.

A commitment to the key features of the anchors approach will also be very important in building capacities and delivering a range of benefits for individuals and communities. They include a strong focus on localised control, addressing needs in a multi-purpose and holistic way, and a commitment to involving all sections of a community/region including those who are the most frequently marginalised.

Consistent with the potential of anchor organisations and especially groups of them for the development of new opportunities in RRR locations, fostering ways and means for different kinds of organisations to work together productively to create better opportunities for young people and communities was strongly advocated in submissions and in many meetings.

As one person in the Western Australian Wheatbelt commented "silos [read bureaucracy, red tape and organisations working alone] trap and store stuff but we need to be able to use resources more flexibly to do what is needed here".

In addition to schools which have a much dispersed presence across RRR, universities and hubs with their substantial critical mass linked to their delivery footprint also provide major opportunities for driving innovation and creating new wealth generation for individuals and communities.

Universities have substantial capacity to do more for regions, especially by working in partnership with the other key anchors as listed above.

Some are engaged in delivering VET qualifications as 'dual sector providers', that is, universities that are also registered to teach VET, and/or already working closely with VET

partners to collaborate and maximise the opportunities for students. While there have been some problems and underachievement with this approach, there have also been successes. It is the successes which shed light on ways of expanding post schooling opportunities for RRR students and the further policy work that needs to be done to embed them as mainstream options.

However, to fully unlock the potential of a 'new deal for RRR communities' it is critical that VET and particularly the issues and problems consistently encountered during consultations about TAFE be addressed. It is also important to recognise that high quality VET, where it is available, is playing a crucial role in helping young people develop the skills and knowledge they require to gain employment, build careers, start their own businesses and much more. The trouble is the major variability in access, availability and affordability and also the complexity of how to negotiate and navigate the way into and through a high quality VET pathway.

University, VET and status

In addition, there is the enduring problem which has been 'part and parcel' of education in Australia for over a century, namely the status and value differential between a VET pathway and qualification compared with a university degree. The net effect of this issue is the worth and relevance of VET is diminished and discounted at a time when the exact opposite is required.

One reason this is happening is the high visibility of university pathways and the fact teachers have been educated at universities and have a tendency to advise and advocate what is most familiar.

The conclusion I have reached is that nationally, TAFE has to be put back into the regions, closer to people, places and the heartland of much of Australia's productivity.

It is clear that the issues of adequate funding for TAFE, access to and the costs of programs for students, designing new flexible offerings and enhanced qualification scaffolding and recognition with universities must all be included in a 'root and branch' review.

Consistent with many other issues associated with RRR education, distance, low numbers, thin markets, availability, access and costs all impact on VET –in –Schools (VETiS), as well as already flagged the status of VET compared to a university pathway. Also in common with progressing improvements in other areas, the use of ICT was advocated.

In addition to the challenges of embedding VET options into a school's curriculum and ensuring they are taught and assessed consistent with the required industry standards, consultations revealed a range of other more values based issues which impede the availability and uptake of VETiS and VET more broadly.

Firstly, schools are primarily staffed by teachers; overwhelmingly teachers have followed an academic pathway, ie universities. For many, perhaps most, vocational pathways and the business and industry environments are not within their personal experience. As well, universities also actively market to schools with 'travelling university fairs', and encourage schools to attend open days and the like. They also have outreach mentoring programs where university students work in schools to demystify going to university.

In contrast to this, the level of marketing undertaken by vocational education providers is much less co-ordinated and much less pervasive, partly due to lack of funding. Secondly, for students who are undecided about their future, a university course seems a viable option

especially when fees can be deferred. As well, the value of a vocational pathway is not fully understood and the potential income levels for those with higher vocational skills and qualifications are not widely promoted compared to earnings for most university graduates.

The high status courses of law and medicine for example give an unrealistic view of the potential earnings for all university graduates. In addition, advice was received that employers often do not value VET pathways delivered by schools, as the learning is frequently considered to be substandard to that provided in a 'real' VET provider ie TAFE. While this is not true for all, it is another factor to be considered as is the low valuing of auspicing in some instances.

Another option for improving post school opportunities for RRR young people is diversifying the university pathway choices and reducing the length of time it takes to complete a qualification that is recognised and valued by employers. As already outlined, the dual VET/university scaffolding is an example of this. Another is the two year degree model which has been developed by the University of Tasmania.

The flexible design of the degree includes the ability to exit after one year of successful study with a diploma and counting the full value of an Associate Degree towards completing a Bachelor level qualification.

A copy of the full report (and associated documents) is available at

https://www.education.gov.au/independent-review-regional-rural-and-remote-education

Reference

Civil Renewal Unit. (2004). Firm Foundations: The Governments Framework for Community Capacity Building. London: Home Office.