



THE LEADING VOICE *on* RURAL EDUCATION

NATIONAL REGIONAL, RURAL AND REMOTE EDUCATION STRATEGY

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cep.org.au

Email: admin@cep.org.au

INTRODUCTION

The Country Education Partnership wants to see all children and young people within rural and remote communities having access to high quality education within their communities, and also to have the opportunity to realise their dreams through an affordable, supported and accessible higher education programs.

It believes that with the ambition of the current Commonwealth Government to enhance and improve access to quality education for rural and remote across Australia through the Independent Review and subsequent Regional Education Expert Advisory Group, there is now a real opportunity to explore innovative ways of facilitating a range of initiatives which will result in the greater involvement of young people in higher education and related education programs.

It would encourage the Expert Advisory Group to acknowledge that there is a range of positive and innovative initiatives already occurring throughout Australia and that such initiatives could be strengthened and further developed to ensure that rural and remote communities across Australia benefit.

Country Education Partnership would specifically encourage the Expert Advisory Group to explore the Rural Inspire initiative that it developed a number of years ago, as a key strategy in improving the aspirations of rural and remote young people across Australia, and not just in Victoria and close by states where it operates at present.

The rural and remote young people who form the centre of the Rural Youth Ambassador Alumni would encourage the Advisory Group to consider a range of initiatives that would provide stronger support for young people to attend higher education programs, especially in those cases where young people need to relocate.

In conclusion, representatives of the Country Education Partnership, and the Rural Youth Ambassador Alumni would be very happy to meet with members of the Expert Advisory Group to explore some of the ideas and suggestions contained within this report.



Phil Brown
Executive Officer

Challenge A: There are fewer study options available in RRR areas

- *What opportunities exist to expand options for further study in RRR areas?*
- *What potential is there for universities, vocational training providers and other service providers to better work together in RRR areas, including opportunities to expand service offerings and better support articulation between VET and higher education?*

Unlike many European countries, Australia has little access to for rural and remote young people within their local community, or in a nearby regional centres.

While there is University presence in a number of regional cities, their campuses are often seen as an “offshoot” of a metropolitan university, or seen by young people as “second choice”.

From the experience of the Country Education Partnership, and the young people who have been involved within the Rural Youth Ambassador program over the past eight years, rural and remote young people tend to explore Universities within regional locations as their first option, thus decreasing the “threat” and isolation that a larger metropolitan university may bring. The difficulty, however of this movement of rural and remote young people is that the courses they have available within these campuses have limited courses and curriculum choices.

In addition, the work of the Rural Youth Ambassadors in relation to what rural and remote young people undertake after completing their schooling tends to indicate that those who move towards a larger university, generally located within a metropolitan setting, are those who have had exposure to the university and “city life” as a result of programs that support their involvement in such settings (eg the Kwong Lee Dow program in Melbourne), their families invest time in ensuring the rural and remote young people are exposed to these opportunities, or the young people themselves have been involved in leadership programs such as the Rural Youth Ambassadors that introduce them to such opportunities and living.

Having said this, those rural and remote young people who don't have these opportunities, they tend to choose a vocational based program close to their location, or seek employment.

The Country Education Partnership, along with the Rural Youth Ambassadors would support the development of a “Regional/Rural Hub Hub” strategy that would potentially link any University to communities within rural and remote locations. The proposal of a partnership approach that could see Universities work with rural, remote and regional education settings such as schools and adult education centres could serve as a real opportunity to support rural and remote young people having access to university programs, as well as contributing to the economic development of the local community.

Consideration of a blended learning model, where rural and remote young people could be involved in a combination of:

- ◆ Online classes and tutorials with young people from a range of locations;
- ◆ Access to online resources and study resources; and
- ◆ A number of face-to-face forums, or intensives, located on the universities main delivery location.

The Aurora Virtual School established within New South Wales as part of their rural education strategy has seen many students able to access learning in areas they would otherwise not have access to through a blended learning approach.

Would it be possible to take the learning's from this program, and explore whether a similar approach could be developed within the higher education sector.

In addition, programs that operated with the Wodonga campus of Latrobe University within the education department saw students involved in:

- ◆ ***Online classes and tutorials facilitated by university staff;***
- ◆ ***Online resources and assessment tasks;***
- ◆ ***Three to four face to face intensive program held over a two week period onsite; and***
- ◆ ***Be involved in practical experiences within their local community to gain valuable practical experience and learning.***

Challenge B: Relocating RRR students face significant financial, emotional and social challenges

- *What financial supports work best for students from RRR backgrounds, including those who choose to relocate?*
- *What forms of support might be useful in helping students from RRR backgrounds to continue with their tertiary study?*
- *How can universities assist RRR students to feel like they belong on their campus?*

Rural and remote young people often experience difficulties related to attending a university program that they would like to participate within, especially when this requires them to relocate, gain accommodation, and often gain employment to cover the costs associated with the university program.

Two researches undertaken by Country Education Partnership a few year ago, highlighted that rural and remote young people were three times less likely to undertake a university course due to the cost of relocation and accommodation, and lack of financial support, available to them.

This is further complicated when the families of these young people are required to find the financial support required for there young people to attend, and remain within, their university program – and in recent times, this has been exacerbated by the pressures that rural and remote families have had to face in relation to drought and other environmental challenges.

While there are some support services available to rural and remote young people through various government departments such as relocation support, and income support provided they accommodate the assessment criteria many are not specifically targeting the needs of these young people.

The Country Education Partnership believes that it is time for governments to review the current suite of support programs, and seriously consider a specific scholarship approach to support rural and remote young peoples involvement within their university program of choice. For example, within the current Youth Allowance schemes, students from any location can gain support to attend university.

Would it be possible to have a specific scheme centred on the needs of rural and remote young people whoa re required to relocate and gain accommodation, to allow them to participate within the university program of their desire?

In relation to the role that universities can provide in supporting the involvement of rural and remote young people within their university courses, both Country Education Partnership and the Rural Youth Ambassadors would strongly suggest the expansion of “exposure” based programs targeting rural and remote young people, supporting them during their school days to experience life within a university setting, and to also acquaint them with larger urban settings. While there are currently a small number of programs available within a number of universities across Australia, expansion of these initiatives that also include a financial support mechanism would be an extremely positive step in supporting greater participation of rural and remote young people in university programs.

Another proposal that the Rural Youth Ambassadors would propose for strong consideration of governments is the provision of an initiative that they have developed within Victoria, known as Rural Inspire, there are a number of programs that comprise this initiative, the specific “School to Next” program would be one that they would strongly propose for support into the future. Over the eight years of the Rural Youth Ambassador program, over 150 rural and remote young people now comprise the Rural Youth Ambassador Alumni.

Many of these Alumni young people are now studying within a university or training organisation within an urban location – currently every university within Victoria, ACT and South Australia have Alumni young people studying. They also have Alumni young people in a number of New South Wales universities and well as a small number of Universities within Queensland. In addition, there are Alumni young people studying within the Australian Armed Forces.

With the success of the Rural Inspire initiative, the Rural Youth Ambassadors have been requested to support other states in establishing similar initiatives for rural and remote young people – however, due to lack of resources, the implementation of an expanded program has been constrained.

These young people have worked together to provide a range of services for young people across rural and remote Victoria including:

- ◆ Providing information workshops for their “hometown” outlining the opportunities tertiary education provides – some of these are delivered through virtual platforms.;
- ◆ Providing a mentoring role for rural and remote young people interested in undertaking tertiary study;
- ◆ Providing opportunities for rural and remote young people visit a range of tertiary institutes over one weekend, thus addressing the real challenge of rural and remote young people attending open days over a number of weekends:
- ◆ Providing an online social media platform to allow rural and remote young people to have access to information, online forums to talk to Alumni young people, and the like;
- ◆ Facilitating university visits and tours for rural and remote schools to experience university life – something that many of these young people don't get the experience of otherwise;
- ◆ Providing support networks for rural and remote young people once they have relocated to urban settings to attend university.

This initiative has proven to be extremely popular amongst rural and remote young people, and has resulted in a number of young people becoming enthused about tertiary education studies.

It was highlighted within the Independent Review of Regional, Rural and Remote Education as good practice, and a practical recommendation within the report was to provide resources to expand the Rural Inspire nationally.

The Rural Youth Ambassadors would strongly suggest governments and education sectors to provide resources to expand such an initiative so that rural and remote young people in other states of Australia can have access to such a program.

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Challenge C: Raising aspirations for tertiary education

- *What actions would help to raise aspirations and support informed career choices for students from RRR backgrounds?*

The aspirations of rural and remote young people have been a key area of focus for the Country Education Partnership for a number of years now. This area of focus was established as a result of a number of research projects undertaken within Victoria focusing on rural and remote communities across the state and the aspirations of their young people.

Three key researches were completed including:

- ◆ A research undertaken by Federation University focusing on rural and remote communities within the western part of Victoria;
- ◆ A research undertaken by Federation University focusing on rural and remote communities in the north east part of Victoria; and
- ◆ A research undertaken by University of Melbourne, Latrobe University and Federation University focusing on four rural communities across Victoria.

All research projects highlighted the lower levels of aspirations being experience by rural and remote young people within the focus communities, and the need to develop initiatives that would address such aspirations.

In response, the Country Education Partnership developed the Rural Youth Ambassador program in 2011 as a state-wide strategy to provide a strong voice for rural and remote young people and to explore the key aspirational challenges faced by them. Since its inception, a total of eight Rural Youth Ambassador programs have now been supported, and their work has impacted directly on government education policy and influenced education sector approaches to rural and remote education.

As a result of the success of the program, there are over 150 rural and remote young people who are now part of a Rural Youth Ambassador Alumni.

A key action from the 2014 Rural Youth Ambassadors was the establishment of a comprehensive range of information and programs to increase the aspirations of young people within rural and remote communities. As a result, the "Rural Inspire" initiative was born, and is now growing in popularity and reputation not only within Victoria, but in other states as well.

For an overview of the Rural Inspire initiative, please see the attached and link:

www.ruralinspire.org.

The Rural Youth Ambassadors would be very keen to talk to the Regional Education Expert Advisory Group about their experiences and the impact that the program has had on them individually, but also many young people they have been supporting over the past eight years.

They would also be interested to explore with governments as to how such an initiative can be supported to accommodate the growing demand for its programs and services.

Challenge D: RRR often experience multiple forms of disadvantage

- *What practical steps can be taken to support RRR students who experience multiple forms of disadvantage?*
- *How can we better support Indigenous people from RRR areas to access and succeed in tertiary education?*

The experience that Country Education Partnership has in relation to the multiple forms of disadvantage has show that there is a growing number of rural and remote communities indicating that there is an increase in the number of low socio economic families relocating to rural communities communities, and that this has been a trend over the past five to ten years.

While there are most likely many reasons for this change in demographic, the changes that have occurred in the agriculture industry, and related fields have resulted in areas such as cheaper housing being an attraction to this component of these communities.

While there are some support programs in place for low socio economic families to participate in higher education through the various Youth Allowance initiatives, as mentioned earlier, Country Education Partnership believes there needs to be the exploration of a specific financial support initiative developed for these young people from rural and remote communities, especially as the majority of them will need to relocate for their university program.

While Country Education Partnership has had involvement supporting the involvement of indigenous young people in education throughout rural and remote communities, the organisation hasn't had direct involvement in their involvement within university.

Country Education Partnership sits on the Marrung Governing Body within Victoria – a partnership between the Department of Education and Training in Victoria and the indigenous education community, and within this Indigenous Framework, there are a number of specific initiatives which have resulted in increased participation of indigenous young people in higher education – research into this activities would be worth considering.

Challenge E: Attracting people and jobs to RRR areas

- *How can tertiary education providers further stimulate economic growth in RRR areas?*
- *What actions would further strengthen and increase the attractiveness of regional universities?*
- *What policies would attract more metropolitan and international students to study at RRR areas, including regional universities and campuses?*

The Country Education Partnership hasn't had much experience within this area of investigation.

Having said that, the various initiatives that the organisation has undertaken in forging partnerships between universities and local school partnerships have been extremely positive. While focused on the education section of universities, these partnerships have resulted in research projects, involvement of university students within specific projects, and university staff providing professional development and expertise has had a significant impact on these rural and remote communities.

Country Education Partnership would have the view that a whole of community approach that includes local education settings, along with local government, businesses and the broader community working with higher education would be the most effective strategy for attracting university involvement within the local communities.

Challenge F: Implementing and monitoring a national strategy

- *Would there be value in establishing a National Regional Education Commissioner to oversee the Strategy and, if so, what should their role be?*
- *How should success be measured? What goals and targets, including for tertiary education attainment, should be considered both at a national and individual community level?*

Country Education Partnership has a strong view that there needs to be a national voice for rural and remote education.

The organization has had involvement in recent initiatives such as the Rural Education Forum of Australia, established to provide such a voice, but was not successful in gaining ongoing resourcing from government and education sectors, thus a national voice was lost.

In addition, there are a number of organizations that exist within the education space across Australia already. Perhaps a strategy that would be worth exploring is the facilitation of this various "peak organizations" focused on rural education to meet at a national level and provide a basis for input into the strategy. Organizations such as Society for the Provision of Education within Rural Australia, Foundation for Regional and Rural Renewal, Country Education Foundation, and our organization all have a specific focus on rural and remote education within Australia, and all bring a deep knowledge and expertise within the rural and remote education sector.

There are also a number of other peak organizations that could provide input into discussions related to rural and remote education at a national level. Principal organizations, parent organizations, student voice organizations, and broader rural and remote organization could also contribute to this conversation.

The concept of a National Regional Education Commissioner has merit, and could provide a strong voice representative of rural and remote education across Australia. Potentially their role could include:

- ◆ Providing a strong voice for rural and remote education to government and education sectors, primarily at a national level, but could also provide input into state governments and education sectors, especially at a school level;
- ◆ Convening forums and discussion that engage with the key peak organizations in relation to rural and remote education across Australia;
- ◆ Engage with other key organizations that need to be included within the discussion focused on rural and remote education;
- ◆ Provide a strong leadership role in the development, and implementation of, the Rural Education Strategy.
- ◆ Advocating to governments for resourcing to be provided to support the implementation of initiatives and projects identified within the Rural Education Strategy.

In terms of the goals and targets that should be set for the Rural Education Strategy, Country Education Partnership would highlight areas such as:

- ◆ Greater participation rates of rural and remote young people within higher education programs and courses;
- ◆ A growing interest at a local community level of rural and remote young people desiring to undertake a higher education program;
- ◆ The establishment of university and local community partnerships in the provision of higher education programs within rural and remote locations.



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