



National Regional, Rural and Remote Education Strategy

Submission form

Welcome to the submission process for the National Regional, Rural and Remote Education Strategy (the Strategy).

The Regional Education Expert Advisory Group invites all interested parties to put forward ideas on the [framing paper](#) released on 20 December 2018.

The Advisory Group is seeking action-orientated responses to the challenges and key questions identified in this paper. The paper outlines the background of the strategy formation, the problem facing regional, rural and remote education and the challenges faced by those communities.

Your responses to the Framing Paper should focus on practical steps the Government could take to improve tertiary education access and attainment for people from regional, rural and remote backgrounds.

The form can be submitted any time before public submissions close at **5:00pm (AEDT) on 1 February 2019**.

Please note that the fields in the form are text only and pictures cannot be included. To return your completed form or if you experience difficulties in completing the form, please contact the Strategy Secretariat at RegionalStrategy@education.gov.au.

Note:

- information provided through the submission process may be published with your permission, including in the documentation relating to the Strategy and on the department's website
- questions marked with a * require an answer to be provided.

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I agree to the Privacy Notice and Terms and Conditions of Submissions included at [Attachment A](#) to this document*

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I agree to have my submission published.*

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Your details

Title*

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State/Territory*

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| Victoria |
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Would you like to receive updates about the Strategy's process? *

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Submission details

I am making this submission as a: *

Educator

parent/carer/guardian

Student / potential student

School

University

Training Provider

Employer

community organisation

government agency

peak body / Think Tank

academic person

Other

Are you submitting on behalf of an organisation (including a business, other body or agency)? *

| |
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Please specify the organisation on whose behalf you are submitting

| |
|-------------------|
| Abingdon Advisory |
|-------------------|

I confirm that I have the organisation's agreement to make this submission. *

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Key Questions from the Framing Paper

The Regional Education Expert Advisory Group is seeking responses to the following key questions. Specifically, we are looking for practical steps to overcome the five challenges facing students from RRR backgrounds.

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

1. What opportunities exist to expand options for further study in RRR areas?
2. 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?

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

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

Challenge C: Raising aspirations for tertiary education

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

Challenge D: RRR often experience multiple forms of disadvantage

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

Challenge E: Attracting people and jobs to RRR areas

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

Challenge F: Implementing and monitoring a national strategy

12. Would there be value in establishing a National Regional Education Commissioner to oversee the Strategy and, if so, what should their role be?
13. 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?

Please use the space provided below to respond to the questions above

The table cell will expand to accommodate your response. Please limit your response to 3000 words.

INTRODUCTION

Abingdon Advisory has undertaken a comprehensive project called *Strengthening Higher Education in Regional Australia* (SHEIRA) in order to tackle the challenge of improving educational outcomes in regional, rural and remote (RRR) areas.

As a result of this work, Abingdon Advisory is able to provide detailed findings and recommendations to the Regional Education Expert Advisory Group. Space limitations mean that only an overview of a portion of these can be included in this submission. For further information, or any other assistance, please contact Dr Michael Thorne, Managing Director, Abingdon Advisory at [REDACTED]

BACKGROUND

STAGE ONE

The first stage of the SHEIRA project was the creation of the *UniOptions* website, which operated as a five-year pilot from 2011 to 2016. Extremely successful, this was Australia's only dedicated university pathways information service for families, students and careers teachers. Through *UniOptions.com*, Abingdon Advisory provided free, detailed and independent information to young people and their families about accessing and undertaking tertiary education. *UniOptions* included extensive material tailored specifically to assist families from RRR areas to attend university. This included case studies of people from non-metropolitan areas who had successfully used university pathways to achieve their educational and career goals.

At the heart of this service was the *UniOptions Pathway Planner*. This sophisticated online tool enabled students to select their favoured course, enter their ATAR (expected or actual) and then to map the various pathway options open to them to achieve entry to their desired course. All this pathway information (and other advice about tertiary study) was provided at

no charge, without marketing or other revenue sources. As well as being free, the information provided was both comprehensive and independent.

Some universities have since followed the *UniOptions* lead in creating pathway planners. However, these are severely limited in their utility because, rather than being independent and comprehensive, they provide only selective information. The pathway tools offered by universities are aimed at marketing individual institutions to prospective students, rather than advising young people of all the study options available to them.

STAGE TWO

In the second stage of SHEIRA, Abingdon Advisory provided direct face-to-face tertiary education pathways guidance to schools, careers teachers and families across regional Victoria. This involved attending career and further study information sessions at schools and speaking to families about options for tertiary study. In addition, Abingdon Advisory has undertaken extensive online university pathway information sessions, hosted by the *Herald-Sun* newspaper. Once again, all information provided by Abingdon Advisory has been independent, comprehensive and free of charge.

STAGE THREE

Sponsored by the Commonwealth and Victorian Governments, through the Hume Regional Development Australia (RDA) Committee, the 'Hume Region Higher Education Information Navigation Project' was undertaken by Abingdon Advisory in 2014-2015. Drawing on input from across Victoria's north-east, this project recommended a number of practical, low cost actions to reduce the impact of barriers that contribute to low higher education attainment levels in RRR Australia.

The project included an extensive literature review, consultation with regional education sector stakeholders and input from parents, carers and schools to identify barriers and solutions. The 75-page report was published in 2015.

Recommendations identified by the project and detailed in the report by Abingdon Advisory relate to:

- improving the provision of information to regional families about tertiary study
- raising and broadening educational aspirations in regional areas
- increasing the understanding of higher education pathways by families in RRR areas

- providing improved information about the costs of tertiary study for families in regional Australia.

The findings detailed in the report reflect, not only Abingdon Advisory's expertise in this area, but also direct consultation with regional families and schools about reducing the barriers to university entry faced by young people from RRR areas.

OVERVIEW OF ABINGDON ADVISORY'S FINDINGS

Low aspiration is a serious problem for some students

Throughout consultations with Abingdon Advisory, families, teachers and school principals agreed that many regional families are disengaged from education and have limited educational aspirations, allied with a focus on immediate employment outcomes.

This vocational focus of parents and young people in regional Australia may exaggerate the value of a young person's local, part-time employment and undervalue the significant longer-term benefits of undertaking tertiary study. Improving awareness of the benefits of ongoing education can be expected to shift attitudes toward higher education within RRR Australia. These benefits include higher incomes and employment rates along with improved eligibility for jobs that are fulfilling.

The opinion of the families, teachers and principals who have spoken with Abingdon Advisory is that the raising and broadening of aspirations is a long process that should commence in primary schools and be maintained throughout secondary school.

Narrowly vocational aspirations limit the potential of students and their communities.

Even among those RRR Australians who choose further studies, narrowly vocational tertiary courses are popular, especially in regional areas. Australian students, particularly in RRR areas, are typically most attracted to tertiary courses that they believe have a direct, immediate vocational outcome. This demonstrates a linear perception of career development and overlooks the dynamism of the Australian economy, increasing technology and the probability that young people will, throughout their life, work in a range of roles in different

sectors. An excessively short-term vocational approach to education decision-making is unlikely to maximise a student's long-term options or resilience to change.

Nonetheless, universities have responded to this market demand by repackaging existing broader courses into narrow, apparently more vocational, offerings. For example, subjects offered in a Bachelor of Arts which are connected to communications are bundled together to create a 'Bachelor of Communications' or 'Bachelor of Arts (Communications)'. Typically, these courses contain no material that is not available to students undertaking a broader Bachelor of Arts. The main difference is that students doing the communications degree have a reduced opportunity to study a broader range of subjects and they graduate with a less versatile qualification.

By holding to a very strong vocational focus, students who attend university from RRR areas are more likely to enrol in such specialist degrees, risking their access to broader subject choices and associated career opportunities. Instead, provision of improved information about tertiary education and employment should encourage young people in non-metropolitan areas to take a broader approach to further education. In particular, completing a generalist qualification is likely to create more resilient community members who are better able to succeed in a changing job market over a long period. Families in regional Australia would benefit from the provision of further information about the full range of studies relevant to attaining careers in a range of fields.

The role of Vocational Education and Training (VET) in regional Australia is complex, but still crucial.

VET, and especially TAFE, is important for the provision of tertiary education in RRR Australia. Often, it offers many young people in a relatively geographically accessible and affordable source of industry relevant training. With strong industry links and a vocational focus, many VET providers deliver employment opportunities to students and graduates.

For many, particularly in regional areas, VET provides the opportunity to learn a trade or other skill that is likely to provide employment in their district. VET also provides communities and industry with trained workers to undertake trades and other roles that are of social and economic importance and are usually familiar to families in RRR areas.

Furthermore, TAFE may provide an effective stepping stone to university. In this role, a number of TAFE and other VET providers frequently offer the advantage of geographic proximity, relatively low fees and a supportive environment.

In short, TAFE is important to RRR students because it is low cost and often less geographically difficult. In addition, because the vocational focus of TAFE aligns with their own very vocational approach to education, some families believe that TAFE offers graduates better employment opportunities than university study. On the other hand, because VET provides many students with an option that is affordable, more convenient and expressly vocational, it may divert students who could otherwise have undertaken higher learning at a university.

Students, regardless of their family background, should be able to participate in the courses and careers that best suit their capabilities and interests. However, the *On Track* data and many other studies, show that the VET sector overwhelmingly draws its students from regional families and, in particular, those who are disadvantaged financially or socially. On the other hand, universities see an over representation of young people from metropolitan areas and from families who enjoy a range of economic and social benefits.

Families have a poor understanding about university pathways.

In Abingdon Advisory's extensive discussions with regional communities, families demonstrated a lack of knowledge about the more than a dozen distinct pathways to university. Abingdon Advisory has undertaken both face-to-face consultations and online pathways information sessions (hosted by News Corp). In these many discussions with RRR stakeholders, there has been keen interest in the insights provided about pathway options. In addition, participants expressed a hope that information about the many pathways into higher education to be made more widely available.

There is a strong demand for information about tertiary studies – particularly about costs.

Throughout the community forums that Abingdon Advisory hosted with regional communities, there was a strong desire expressed by families for more information about attending university. This included information on things such as course pre-requisites, university applications processes and what it is like to be a university student. However, by far the most strident calls were for information about the costs of undertaking tertiary education and the support available. In particular, there was a strong demand expressed for information around the costs associated with accommodation at each major university campus.

The most readily available information about tertiary education is confusing and seeks to ‘sell’ rather than ‘inform’.

Previous studies indicate that there is an uneven use of information about universities across the community. Investigations show that more families from high-SES and urban backgrounds report receiving information about accessing university than families from low-SES and RRR backgrounds.

Regionally-located families consulted by Abingdon Advisory were critical of university expos for failing to provide enough information on course prerequisites and important matters such as the preference process. In addition, regional families indicated a wish to better understand basic matters such as university terminology and improved understanding about ‘a day in the life’ of a university and TAFE student.

Australia has a complex tertiary education market with public and private providers competing hard to attract and retain students. Existing university pathway planners, for example, provide information only on the pathways to a particular institution. University marketing departments are understandably loathe to suggest that an aspiring student undertake a course elsewhere. Thus, most information provided to students and their families about tertiary education is marketing material. It is described by regional families as ‘overwhelming’ and ‘very confusing’ and it has the potential to mislead.

Many Australian families are unaware that even public tertiary education providers are fiercely competitive organisations with a strong commercial focus. Consequently, the information provided by these institutions is often seen by RRR Australians especially as

objective, government-funded educational advice, rather than the products of university marketing teams.

This issue is particularly challenging in RRR areas because families in non-metropolitan Australia are less exposed to the university marketing that blankets bus-stops, freeways and train stations in Australia's capital cities. Consequently, regional Australian families are more inclined to view university-derived course information as akin to information from the Bureau of Meteorology or the Health Department in terms of its independence. Urban students and families, in contrast, are more inclined to view university marketing more appropriately as offering a range of complex and competing options and models as occurs in the proffering of mobile phone plans or banking services.

In the regional community forums undertaken by Abingdon Advisory as part of the SHEIRA project, there was a general dissatisfaction expressed by RRR families with the quantity and quality of information provided by universities.

Families involved in the SHEIRA project expressed a strong desire for a single a source of information about tertiary education that is comprehensive, independent, clear and relevant.

There are benefits in communicating with families, not merely students.

Notable in Abingdon Advisory's discussions with regional families were some highly engaged parents, desperate to improve their understanding, in contrast to their student children who were clearly disengaged and not showing interest in the many pathways that they might use to achieve entry into a university course.

Generally, school-based careers advisers focus on communicating with students, rather than parents and carers. This is despite some parents demonstrating higher levels of engagement. It was quite evident from community forum outcomes that many school students are poor at communicating information about further study to parents and carers, despite the interest of parents in receiving such information.

This accords with the experience that Abingdon Advisory has also had with its *UniOptions* website and in hosting of the *Herald-Sun* online discussions about university pathways. Often, it is anxious parents who are seeking information. Abingdon Advisory frequently encounters very poor parental understanding about matters such as university entry processes. This suggests a lack of communication between students and their families given that these are basic matters almost certain to have been covered on multiple occasions by careers advisers (and others) throughout the school year. Certainly, RRR parents have expressed dissatisfaction with important information being provided only to students or to parents only via students.

In such cases, improved and direct communication with parents and carers is likely to be very productive. It is clear from the SHEIRA project that there is demand from RRR families for information to be made more readily (and directly) available to them.

OVERVIEW OF ABINGDON ADVISORY'S RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Raising aspirations

Build educational aspiration earlier in life, with provision of information to families about higher education commencing in primary school and continuing throughout secondary school.

Specifically, it is recommended that:

- Careers advisors and primary schools focus on opportunities for engaging with regional families during primary school years.
- A tailored information program for parents of primary school students be developed and implemented, initially as a pilot program in a small number of RRR locations.
- RRR families be strongly encouraged to visit at least one university campus before their children reach the middle of secondary school.
- Families be provided with more information about university life and value of the deferred benefits of tertiary study. This will help mitigate against the tendency for students and their families to limit their focus to the more immediate benefits of getting a job or pursuing a restricted number of vocational pathways.

- Efforts be made to mitigate the limiting effects of the extremely vocational focus of RRR families through provision of information containing examples of generalist university degrees leading to successful career outcomes.

2. Improving the provision of information to regional families about tertiary education

Recognise regional families as an important stakeholder group with distinct demands, expectations, needs and communications styles; and provide them directly with more information.

There is a need for more information about tertiary education, including information about study options and related support (such as financial assistance and accommodation services) to be provided directly to Australians in RRR areas.

As an initial step for improving the provision of information to Australians in RRR areas, it is recommended that a website be developed targeted to people in regional areas and that it incorporates links for both parents and students to key information sources on navigating pathways to university. This site should include link to information sources for courses, accommodation and financial assistance, including those hosted by tertiary education providers, government departments and other providers of information about higher education.

3. Increasing the understanding of university pathways by families

Challenge common misconceptions and reduce information gaps by providing improved access to specific information about higher education pathways.

Particularly among RRR families, a belief that a student's Year 12 ATAR is a single 'one off' determinant of eligibility for higher education can act as a disincentive and also directly limit the opportunity for students to achieve their educational potential.

It is recommended that:

- There be greater availability of advice and resources to RRR families specifically on the navigation of university options by young people.
- Comprehensive and independent university pathways information sessions be held across RRR Australia in the 'change of preference' period, after Year 12 students have received their ATAR and before families must finalise their university options for the following year. This should not be confused with university marketing exercises that are neither comprehensive nor independent.

4. Providing improved information about the costs of tertiary study for families

Assist families to access information about the cost of supporting a student to undertake university study, available financial support and options for reducing the financial burden.

Families in RRR Australia face significant costs when supporting students attending tertiary education. This is because many students in RRR areas especially must live away from home in order to attend university. The SHEIRA project found a strong demand in RRR communities for greater information provision about Youth Allowance eligibility and other forms of financial assistance.

CONCLUSION

In a complex, highly competitive Australian tertiary education market, there is a need for a single source of trusted, relevant information about entering and succeeding in tertiary education. Those most in need of such assistance (including a comprehensive and independent pathway planner) are those Australians who live in RRR areas. The (entirely predictable) failure of the defunct *myuniversity.gov.au* site should not prevent the development of a much more effective solution to the considerable and ongoing problems regarding the provision of independent, comprehensive information to Australians in RRR, in particular.

It is recommended that improvements be made to the provision of information to families in regional Australia about:

- anticipated total expenses associated with tertiary study, including accommodation and other costs associated with young people leaving home,
- Commonwealth Government financial support,
- university scholarship opportunities,
- accessing pastoral and health services at tertiary education providers,
- online study options, and
- education pathway possibilities.

Please provide a short summary of the key points in your submission

Please limit your response to 300 words— **note:** any text above 300 words will be excluded from your submission. The table cell will expand to accommodate your response.

A combination of distance, socio-economic, cultural and information provision factors act in concert and compound each other's effect to result in regional, rural and remote (RRR) areas suffering from poorer higher educational attainment than metropolitan regions. Drawing on a deep understanding of the challenges faced by young people in RRR areas seeking to access tertiary education, Abingdon Advisory has undertaken a comprehensive project to tackle these issues. The name of the project is *Strengthening Higher Education in Regional Australia* (SHEIRA).

As a result of this work, Abingdon Advisory is able to provide detailed findings and recommendations to the Regional Education Expert Advisory Group. Space and time limitations mean that only summaries of some of these have been included in this submission.

In a complex, highly competitive Australian tertiary education market, there is a need for a single source of trusted, relevant information about entering and succeeding in tertiary education. Those most in need of such assistance (including a comprehensive and independent pathway planner) are those Australians who live in RRR areas. The failures of the defunct *myuniversity.gov.au* site should not prevent the development of a more effective solution to the considerable and ongoing problems regarding the provision of independent, comprehensive information to Australians in RRR areas, in particular.

It is recommended that improvements be made to the provision of information to families in RRR Australia about:

- anticipated total expenses associated with tertiary study, including accommodation and other costs associated with young people leaving home,
- Commonwealth Government financial support,
- university scholarship opportunities,
- accessing care and health services at tertiary education providers,
- online study options, and
- education pathway possibilities.

For further information, or any other assistance, please contact [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

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If there is information in your submission referencing an individual, which is not otherwise publicly available, you must ensure that you have the consent of the individual to whom the information relates to include it in the submission. By making a submission, you represent to the department that you have such consent.

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