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The Hon Dr Dennis Napthine  
Chair, Expert Advisory Group  
National Regional, Rural and Remote Education Strategy  
c/- Department of Education and Training  
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Dear Dr Napthine

The Group of Eight (Go8) represents Australia's leading research-intensive universities, with seven of its members ranked in the world's top 100 universities. Each year, Go8 universities deliver over 100,000 quality graduates, and welcome more than 30,000 students from regional, rural and remote areas of Australia.

The Go8 continues to support the development of a national strategy to guide the full scope of education in regional, rural and remote Australia.

As Go8 Chief Executive I provide a brief submission in response to the National Regional, Rural and Remote Education Strategy Framing Paper issued by the Expert Advisory Group in December 2018. Please note that our member universities may provide tailored and more institution-specific submissions.

You would be familiar with the Go8 submission to the *Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education* conducted in 2017, and led by Emeritus Professor John Halsey (the Halsey Review). A number of the Go8's recommendations in our submission to the Halsey Review remain highly relevant in the context of the Framing Paper, and I reiterate these themes here.

As the Framing Paper sets out to establish areas for the Advisory Group to examine more closely prior to issuing a series of Key Issues papers, I have sought to briefly canvass with you the Go8's key areas of concern, and issues in which we are particularly invested.

The key issues and recommendations are:

- That research is vital to ensure Australia's regions can develop economically and socially, therefore enabling universities to invest in research that delivers impact for regional communities is essential; **reversing the inexplicable cuts to research funding in the 2018 Mid-Year Economic and Fiscal Outlook (MYEFO) must be a priority;**
- Provide **meaningful incentives to develop new student accommodation options and to facilitate development of purpose-built accommodation that has an emphasis on regional and remote students;**

- **Lift the level of student income support** which has not risen in real terms for more than 24 years, and deliver much-needed tailored support for those students from regional and remote backgrounds;
- Provide **consistent and long-term investment in higher education equity** through the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP);
- **Ensure funding for access and participation through HEPPP is delivered directly** and not through *de facto* policy measures such as a partial re-opening of demand-driven student funding for one student cohort at the expense of another; and
- Ensure that quality assurance and university autonomy in articulation arrangements is protected.

*It is important for me to state again the Go8's commitment to regional and remote Australia, and to advancing educational opportunities for Australians from there. The Go8 is accordingly a strong supporter of the Government's investment of the Regional Study Hub program.*

### **Go8 commitment to regional and remote Australia**

Go8 universities make a significant contribution to the education of Australia's regional and remote students. Go8 universities are particularly strong in fields that are important to regional and remote Australia and the Go8 maintains substantial outreach investments in regional communities that lift the aspirations for more young Australians to pursue post-secondary education.

- In fact, the Go8 universities invest a far greater proportion of funding received into outreach activities than any other university grouping; almost double the next group

Importantly students from regional and remote backgrounds are more likely to stay and complete their course at a Go8 university with Go8 retention rates for regional and remote students significantly higher than the national average. It is pleasing to note that many of our graduates do return "home" to rural areas to generate wealth and contribute to the well-being of their communities.

While there are a number of Federal Government programs that provide targeted support for regional and remote students, having adequate levels of funding within these programs aligned with appropriate policy settings is essential. Only through this can the best interventions be designed.

- I provide some examples of Go8 outreach and related activities Go8 for your information (**Attachment A refers**).

The Go8 commitment to regional and remote Australia already delivers significant impact, and the activities of Go8 universities in these communities stimulates their economic growth.



The impact of Go8 universities includes delivering graduates of the highest calibre in discipline areas that are critical to regional and remote Australia.

- **Over 60% of Australia's veterinary graduates are educated at a Go8 university**
- **Go8 universities graduate 62% of Australia's medical graduates**
- The Go8 has **medical and health placements in over 580 locations around Australia** as well as a **clinical presence in 24 locations** around regional and remote Australia **adding to eight regional campuses**
- **Approximately half of all students undertaking a degree in Agriculture, environmental or related areas do so at a Go8 university**
- **Three of the five largest providers of agricultural studies are Go8 universities**
- **Australia's major provider of agriculture education – the University of Melbourne – has the largest farm campus in the southern hemisphere at Dookie in Victoria's Goulburn Valley.**

What we provide above is a consistent, long-term investment in regional and remote Australia.

There is a critical need for investment commitments from Government that are equally as consistent and long-term. Requests for this have gone un-heeded.

Enabling universities to make capital investments in regional and remote areas – including in critical research areas – is vital if we are to continue to deliver impact in those communities. Reinstating the Education Investment Fund would be a significant step forward in ensuring universities can do this as required.

The first step, however, must be **reversing the inexplicable cuts made to critical university research funding in the 2018 MYEFO; research which would have delivered significant positive impacts in regional and remote areas.**

- Substantial cuts made to research funding, such as those made in the 2018 MYEFO can have significant adverse effects to research undertaken to support regional and remote communities across in a full range of areas, including in lifting education attainment.

### **Cost of living**

A major **barrier** for students from regional and remote backgrounds attending university is the cost associated with relocation and the most significant costs are living expenses.

The 2017 Universities Australia (UA) Student Finances Survey shows regional students are more likely to experience financial stress: 38% have expenses exceeding their income and 45% of regional students receive student income support. The Survey showed the median expenditure of these students was higher than for other domestic students mostly due to their higher accommodation costs. Regional students are also more likely (as are students from low SES backgrounds) to be supporting dependents.

- The Survey showed that **for undergraduates from regional and remote areas, the median expenditure on living costs was over 92% of all expenditure; equating to 87% of their median income.**



In short, students from regional and remote backgrounds can be shown to be more reliant on student income support, have higher levels of expenditure - mostly due to accommodation - and (consequently) have a higher level of financial stress.

This is a more acute problem for those studying in major metropolitan centres; where all major Go8 campuses are located.

(The decision to abolish the Education Investment Fund in 2014 did mean losing vital University funding that universities used toward new student accommodation).

There is a clear **need for Government to work with universities and the business sector** on the renewal of some existing student housing stock and to develop new accommodation stock, as well as investigate new accommodation options for students with limited financial capacity. To date Government has indicated little willingness to manage this issue in any depth.

### **Student income support**

To help alleviate this problem, **the level of student income support must be increased.**

**Student income support has not increased in real terms for over 24 years.** There can be no doubt that such a need exists, and the UA Survey added to the significant weight of already existing evidence.

*Surely lifting student support should be viewed as an investment by Government rather than a direct cost?*

*Lifting the level of aspiration, participation and attainment of higher education for Australians from regional and remote areas, surely relies on support measures such as this?*

The tailoring of student income support to reflect geographic areas of particular isolation, dislocation and disadvantage should also be considered as part of a package of support measures.

It is known that the key factor deterring regional and remote students from continuing to post-secondary study are the up-front costs – the living expenses: accommodation and food in particular.

Although the current student income support policy framework acknowledges the challenges faced by students from non-metropolitan areas to some degree, by providing access scholarships, the broader student income support framework should be reviewed to better reflect student circumstances and need.

For example, the requirements that prevent students accessing income support unless they are able to meet independent living prerequisites for 14 months can cause students from regional and remote areas to defer study (these students undertake a 'gap' year at three times the rate of metropolitan students).

We know this is when we – and therefore Australia's economy – "lose" potentially excellent students who have already been made a study offer by a Go8 university. They take an unwanted gap year to help them qualify for assistance and, unfortunately for a number of reasons, it becomes all too hard for some to move back to consider post-secondary study.

## Funding for access and participation

Although across the sector the number of regional and remote students in higher education has increased since 2012, there has been a **slow but steady decline in the *proportion* of regional and remote university students.**

- In 2012 there were over 140,200 such students at university and by 2017 this had increased to almost 160,000. However, this **did not translate to an increase in the *proportion* of such students enrolled at university**: that proportion fell from 21.8% to 21.1% in that period.

To lift the proportion of regional and remote students requires specific Government support.

*However, a “rob Peter to pay Paul ethos” is unworthy of Government. **Any suggestion that universities could receive demand-driven funding for students from regional and remote backgrounds at the expense of other student places is clearly untenable.***

*In a funding environment characterised by the effective re-capping of student places, it would be inconsistent with principles of equity – which must surely be upheld - to enable demand-driven funding for one student cohort over any other?*

Moreover, this would provide inconsistent incentives to universities, likely leading to unintended and negative consequences in the medium to long-term. In the short-term, it could also lead to students from metropolitan areas, ‘gaming’ the system where they may not have otherwise obtained university entry.

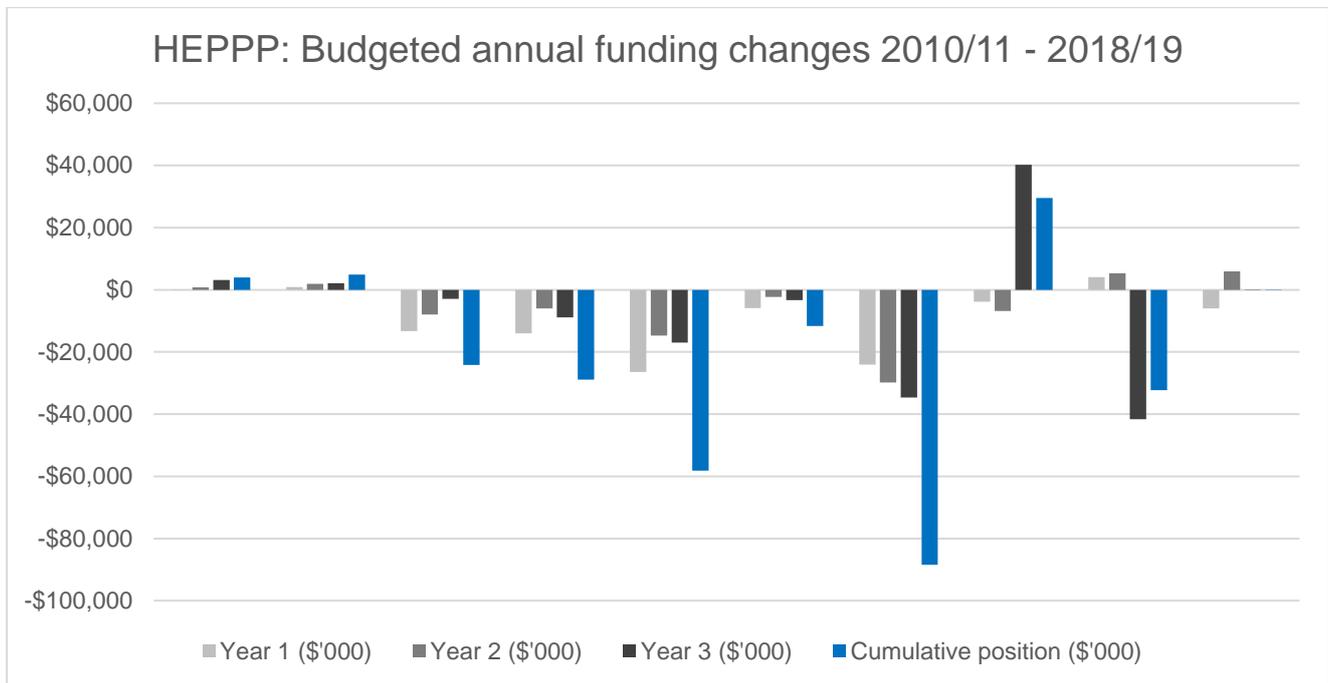
Similarly, in the absence of fully examining and revising the current perverse funding model for universities, providing incentives to enrol exclusively at regional universities risks diminishing the hard-fought quality standards of those campuses and of the university sector more broadly.

The lower rates of university participation among Australians from regional and remote areas is very much influenced by their participation in early childhood and school education and supporting school students from these backgrounds to make successful transitions to university, training and employment was a key recommendation of the Halsey Review. Any national strategic framework to lift aspiration and educational outcomes for Australians from regional and remote locations must include an emphasis on include an emphasis on the links between a strong early childhood and school foundation to successful university participation.

As it relates to program funding to promote access and participation, HEPPP program funding is deficient.

The Go8 exemplar programs set out in **Attachment A** have all been *partly* funded through HEPPP and have also enjoyed significant university investment. Despite this additional investment of financial and other resources by universities, the reality is that these programs are left underfunded when HEPPP funding is cut. This impact is obviously felt by prospective students and communities.

A comparison of annual HEPPP allocations across the forward estimates of each Commonwealth Budget against those in each year of the Budget prior, shows the HEPP Program has experienced over \$205.5m in cuts since its inception in 2009/10.



Source: Department of Education and Training Budget Papers; 2009 - 2018.

Additional funding for programs such as these under the HEPPP umbrella must be a Government priority and **HEPPP funding must be set at a minimum of \$205 million per annum (as forecast in the 2012/13 Budget).**

- In the absence of this previously-forecast funding, the ability of Go8 universities to continue delivering key programs that support the health, medical, educational, social and cultural needs in these communities may be at greater risk.

### Regional study hubs – consolidation and enhancement

The Advisory Group’s Framing Paper highlights some of the particular challenges for regional and remote students insofar as there are fewer study options in regional and remote areas.

The Go8 continues to support the Government’s policy of investing in Study Hubs in Regional Centres. We support that such Hubs enable students to access sub-bachelor and bachelor degree programs in a flexible way through a range of university providers.

**The Go8 advocates that this policy should continue, and with additional investment where necessary.**

Following a period of consolidation and evaluation, the program could be enhanced with further offerings from additional partners across flexible delivery modes that support pre-degree programs offered by universities. Additional investment in this form would also help assure the long-term return on the higher education investment by Government in communities.



## Pathways and program articulation

The Go8 has stated publicly on a number of occasions, going back some five years, that it is time for the university and vocational education sector to work far more closely together; in a holistic way so that we deliver the best post-secondary outcome, with flexible pathways for all students.

The Go8 is adamant post-secondary students should be able to realise their full potential in a study path that is best for them and which brings career satisfaction.

Choosing a trade should not be seen as something lesser. The Go8 believes in the intrinsic economic value of vocational education and is strongly committed to a much more cohesive post-secondary education sector, where students can choose to access a range of pathways to move from university to trade study and vice versa.

The extension of the Hubs policy represents a significant opportunity to expand such *'all of sector'* post-secondary opportunities in regional and remote communities.

The Go8 strongly supports a robust and vibrant VET sector that is underpinned by a strong quality framework. Improved articulation from the VET sector to university, underpinned by robust quality arrangements is essential to Australia's post-secondary education system and in that context the Go8 welcomes other current reviews including of the Australian Qualifications Framework to help support this.

Currently Universities offer credit for prior learning where that prior study meets to university's course requirements; **including in respect to quality**. With pathway programs, universities are generally flexible, although recognition is typically offered where a university has a direct arrangement or agreement in place with the pathway provider rather than offering credit for all ASQA-registered courses in a discipline area. These partnership arrangements enable universities to assure the quality of the educational offering the student has received.

Agreements for recognition of prior learning with university and non-university providers are heavily reliant on quality assurance at the program level and engagement between the parties in that context. As noted in the Framing Paper, the articulation – and recognition – arrangements across the sector vary widely as a result.

I look forward to the opportunity to discuss this submission with you.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "V. Thomson".

**VICKI THOMSON**  
**CHIEF EXECUTIVE**

## Attachment A

Students from regional and remote backgrounds face many additional challenges accessing and succeeding at university than their counterparts from metropolitan areas.

### Raising aspiration in regional and remote Australia:

There are many programs run by Go8 universities that encourage regional and remote students to consider university study and the Go8 believes that a university education should be accessible to all qualified people who choose it regardless of background or circumstance.

- The **University of New South Wales'** ASPIRE program is an educational outreach program working with teachers and students from Kindergarten to Year 12 in 30 schools across regional NSW. It has over 6,900 engagements each year through workshops, residentials, homework clubs, literacy support, other events and online resources. It addresses a critical need for young people in these areas, breaking down barriers to further study by helping students overcome fears and misconceptions and giving them confidence in their own capabilities. Evaluations reveal significant impact, including the number of ASPIRE students offered a place at UNSW increasing 65% (2010-2016). The UNSW Indigenous programs including Winter School, road shows, pre-university preparation and pathways have also been very successful in increasing regional participation.
- The **University of Sydney's** Regional Hub program targets remote indigenous schools with programs to develop strong study habits, workshops on campus and a volunteer program that sees University of Sydney students involved with year 10 literacy programs.
- The **Australian National University's** SetUp for Success program provides transition support to increase the retention rate of students, including from regional and remote areas. Identified students are contacted at the start of the semester and offered campus information, individual appointments and the support of a project officer.
- **Monash University and the University of Melbourne** jointly run the Strengthening Engagement and Achievement in Maths and Science (SEAMS) program to improve student attainment in the areas of Maths and Science. Participants attend 2 residential camps a year over Year 11 and 12 to assist them to gain entry to STEM university Courses. In 2017, 38% of participants were from regional schools.
- The **University of Queensland's** Young Achievers Program is a tertiary aspiration building program for low SES students from state secondary schools in the Ipswich, Logan, Brisbane South, Toowoomba, the Darling Downs, and the South West, Wide Bay and Bundaberg regions of Queensland. Students are nominated for the Program while they in Year 10 by their School Principals and chosen by a selection committee.



- The **University of Adelaide** works with schools across 11 regional areas in South Australia and border regions to help shape students' decisions to increase university participation. Students undertake a combination of presentations, workshops and advising sessions throughout the year as part of the outreach program. University staff also attend field day events and deliver subject-specific outreach programs. They also partner with the Children's University Australia (CUA) Program that engages with schools across South Australia, enabling member schools to offer their student's access to a unique reward-based program recognising participation in extra-curricular activity, and celebrated in an annual graduation ceremony at the University of Adelaide.
- Since 2000, the **University of Western Australia's** Aspire Program has been supporting rural students through the challenging process of applying for medicine or dentistry. It now achieves its ambitious target of 25 per cent of places for rural students in each intake of medical students and 10% of dental students. Students from a rural background are three times more likely to practice medicine in a regional area than those from an urban background, addressing a critical skills shortage in regional Australia.