

Submission on National Regional, Rural and Remote Education Strategy Framing Paper

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Introductory Comments

Education, social, economic, health and employment outcomes are intimately linked, and any successful strategy for regional, rural and remote (RRR) education requires consideration of trends and needs that are in addition to teaching and research.

USC is the major Higher Education provider for a 400km long stretch of South East Queensland, from northern Brisbane to Fraser Coast. The demography of this area includes areas that could be classified as outer-metropolitan, regional and rural. It also includes the two areas (Moreton Bay North and Wide Bay) with the lowest rates of degree attainment amongst young adults in the country (13% and 14% of persons aged 25 to 34 have a Bachelor's Degree, respectively, as compared to the national average of 35%).

USC prioritises increasing access to HE for all equity groups, in particular, students from low SES backgrounds, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and students with disabilities. Strategies include school-based and community-based aspiration building and academic preparation programs, particularly in the STEM disciplines, and a range of activities including on-campus experiences, undergraduate enabling programs including the Tertiary Preparation Pathway. Specific strategies are also in place to address the needs of current USC students from equity groups, these strategies include the introduction of pathway Diplomas in 2019 and the continued offering of equity bursaries and additional support services designed with the overall aim of increasing participation and success of the cohorts of students who enrol at USC.

Challenge A: Fewer Study Options

Historic low access and participation rates in post-secondary education, outside the major capital cities suggests that the legacy service practices of universities, VET and other service providers has not met the needs of RRR individuals and communities. A National strategy would acknowledge these differences and recognise there is more work to be done to provide parity at a national level, supported by a sustainably funded public policy platform for education.

Achieving high rates of access, participation, attainment and completion in HE, particularly for regional students, needs a national strategy to guide joined-up and place-based responses involving the commitment of the three layers of government; schools; parents and carers; students; other education and training providers, and business and community.

It is well accepted that technology can provide parity of access to educational opportunities. However, for many RRR students, learning about how to learn in HE, confidence, capacity and resilience building are activities that need to happen in a technology-enabled and people rich environment.

There is a need for any future strategy to consider institutional use of technology and students and educators' digital fluency. STEM graduates are going to be more and more valuable to employers for future careers. Achieving a technology enabled vision for RRR will require schools and tertiary education providers to invest in access to technologies and programs of technology training for staff. Technological competence will also be a factor when considering student engagement and the need for a multi-channel approach to engaging the learner

in both classroom and support services. Technological stability, in the form of fast and reliable internet services in regional locations will be essential if there is to be equitable access to the benefits of rapid technological advancement. The digital divide should be considered a feature of regionality and should be acknowledged in any strategy.

Historically there has been a focus on HE and public universities in isolation from the VET and community sectors. It may be advantageous to consider vocational education and training and HE under streamlined regulatory, policy and funding arrangements. Feedback from schools across the USC footprint is that vocational education is a key part of the Senior Education and Training Plan that is undertaken in Year 9/10 and the drivers of this type of approach could be considered more generally.

Streamlining related public policy and funding may assist in offering equitable opportunities for students from all backgrounds to engage in higher and further education longer term. Increased awareness of 'how higher and further education is related to professions and careers' is one of the key areas in which outreach activities in Australia have been found to have an impact (Bennett et al. 2015) and consideration to expanding the focus of Employability Skills strategies to explicitly address the labour market constraints in RRR locations will be essential in meeting the needs of individuals and communities.

A coordinated policy platform may provide an opportunity for these outcomes to be achieved through a scaffolded approach to post-secondary options, relevant age appropriate and life stage objectives and priorities within the context of RRR Australia.

- **Action:** Consider expanding 'multi-sector' institutions in locations where the articulation between VET, HE and other service providers can optimise individual and community successes.
- **Action:** Consider a lifecycle approach to sustainable education and career planning options for RRR students.

Development and implementation of sustainable business models for comprehensive HE providers with RRR campuses are difficult. In the Australian context, a sustainable university requires a population catchment of at least 5-600,000 people. There are only six or seven cities in Australia that meet this requirement, and no "regional centres" apart from, perhaps, Newcastle. RRR students typically study at a lower intensity (EFTSL per student) than their metropolitan counterparts, driving the required catchment size even higher. At present, given the regulated HE environment and view of what should constitute a university, there is no obvious way to change the catchment requirement – student fees and related government funding support is fixed, university staff wages are similar throughout the country, desired student:staff ratios are similar (and based on financial viability, teaching quality and accreditation requirements), "core" disciplines and cognate areas of study are similar, minimum levels of research activity are broadly accepted, and so forth. Regional loading has the potential to reduce the sustainable catchment size, but its quantum and application has very little benefit for a university such as USC. Institutes Funding supports ANU, but that funding stream is only available to a very small number of groups.

- **Action:** Can targeted funding assistance to universities with RRR campuses be made of a quantum that materially impacts the required sustainable catchment size, reducing it from the current 500,000+ level (a more effective form of Regional Loading)?

For those universities based in regional centres, or operating regional campuses or study nodes, finding a sustainable catchment means also operating outside of the regional area: through online education, operations in capital cities (often targeting international students), and operations in other regional centres. Online

education has been a common approach for many regional providers but is an area of risk as they often have limited brand equity in their online market (and so are open to losing their market should a well-known local provider launch a rival online program).

- **Observation:** For the last 15+ years, the online education market in Australia has been dominated by small regional providers. It is difficult to see this continuing. Small regional providers often have little market equity away from their regional centres, and so are vulnerable to larger, local institutions providing a rival online offering.

USC is pursuing an operational model where there are large, full-service campuses in two locations (Sunshine Coast and Moreton Bay). The combined catchment of these two locations is around 800,000 residents, and so provides a foundation for sustainable institutional development. USC's more regional/rural campuses, particularly in Fraser Coast, Caboolture and Gympie, can then operate at a marginal-cost scenario, with the two large campuses paying for the bulk of back-office costs and research.

- **Observation:** A sustainable regional campus or study node will operate on a marginal cost basis, with some other campus(es) or activities covering the cost of back-office operations and research. They may also exist as significant research entities within an overall university campus network, with teaching activities currently being of lesser importance.

The marginal cost of teaching varies from discipline-to-discipline. For cognate areas without the need for laboratories and placements (eg, business), the marginal cost of teaching may be of the order of 30% of the fully absorbed cost. For cognate areas requiring laboratories and placements (eg, nursing), the marginal cost may be 70%+ of the fully absorbed cost. To gain break-even student:staff ratios, the conclusion is that of the order of 15-18 EFTSL per full-time academic staff member required for the regional campuses at marginal costing. Depending upon the employment arrangements of academic staff (teaching focussed or teaching and research), meeting this will still require around 2-3 EFTSL per class on average, or 15-25 students per class on average. This is simply unachievable for programs outside of a small number that are typically in high-demand in regional areas (eg, nursing).

Increasing the choice of study options in RRR areas requires approaches to break this scenario, through increasing revenue per student, adopting a teaching pedagogy that reduces academic staff involvement, or changing degree structures.

- **Action:** Expansion of the Regional Loading concept has already been suggested. Study options would be expanded substantially if the average number of students required per class for marginal break-even was between 5-8, rather than 15-20. Funding could be directed at students, or at staff, such as through a Federally-funded "regional scholars" program. Rather than based upon teaching and research outcomes, regional scholars could have KPI's based upon the ability to provide counselling, community economic support and other forms of community engagement, and novel teaching practices that best suit the regional environment. This could also be used to examine better ways of serving Indigenous communities where away-from-base activity is often problematic. Integration of Indigenous education policies with the RRR policies is important to avoid nugatory competition.

Changing program structures and providing pathways through VET is mentioned in the Framing Paper. It should be noted that from USC experience there is a direct linkage between the offering of rigorous non-VET pathway programs (HE enabling programs) and subsequent HE applications in regional centres. The capping on sub-Bachelor load, including enabling programs, has meant that USC has offered several hundred "no income to the

University” enabling places, to increase the pool of students who will be able to attend (and so provide the scale necessary to offer a wider array of study options). However, even with USC offering unfunded places, there is still a practical limit to the supply of enabling/pathway places, which is less than student demand.

- **Action:** Examine the potential for tertiary education enabling programs in RRR areas to be exempt from sub-Bachelor caps, making the places demand driven.

The question of VET as a pathway to HE in RRR areas is not straightforward. An experience has been that there was very little alignment between demand in VET offerings and HE offerings in RRR settings. For example, many local business owners want some level of VET training to run their affairs (high demand for VET business offerings) but have no interest in pursuing a HE business degree. Mechanical, electrical and instrumentation trades students (VET) do not usually have the mathematical background to make the step to a full Bachelor’s in engineering. The movement of childcare workers between VET and HE (or not) is typically a product of industry professional requirements, not a desire to become more skilled in education. There is some indication of regular movement between Enrolled and Registered Nursing qualifications, and within primary education. However, as a general observation, VET to HE pathway demand in RRR areas is limited as the aspirations for tertiary education amongst RRR residents may not include progression to a Bachelor’s degree – it may simply be VET module-based competency.

Perhaps a more effective approach to pathways lies in focussed development of HE sub-Bachelor (eg, Diploma, Associate Degree) programs that are more aligned with future university study, rather than traditional competency-based VET programs.

Advisory groups emphasise skills portability to young people, to provide opportunities to move between related areas of work as specific jobs grow and decline in the future. The Foundation for Young Australians used a taxonomy based on portable skills to group jobs under headings:

- *Technologists* – with skills to understand and manipulate digital technology.
- *Carers* – in jobs that seek to improve the mental or physical health or well-being of others.
- *Informers* – professions that involve the provision of information, education or business services.
- *Designers* – jobs that involve deploying skills and knowledge of science, mathematics and design to construct or engineer products, infrastructure, etc.
- *Generators* – comprise jobs that require high levels of interpersonal interaction in retail, sales, hospitality and entertainment.
- *Coordinators* – comprise jobs that involved repetitive administrative and behind-the-scenes process or service tasks.
- *Artisans* – require skill in manual tasks related to construction, production, maintenance or technical customer service.

A university is arguably the logical entrance point for at least the first five of these groupings. Providing a pathway through a university Diploma or Associate Degree that is designed to provide the widest possible range of career opportunities within each skills group would have several advantages for the students and the teaching institution:

- Shorter duration programs (1-2 years) where the student can leave with a portable credential.
- Greater flexibility of specialist degree choice at the end of the first stage of study.
- The flexibility to continue towards Bachelor’s degree study, in “completing” programs away from the RRR area if necessary.
- Greater throughput of students for a given load (applied over 1-2 years of study, rather than 3-4).

- Consolidation of classes, to provide scale (even if scale is only 15 students).
- Fewer classes needed to complete the qualification, particularly at the higher-year levels where there are usually few students.
- Improved perceptions of quality: USC market research suggests that 83% of potential students in the SE Queensland catchment perceive university education as superior to other forms of tertiary education, including TAFE/VET.

While aligning pathway programs with general skills area has some appeal from a student and institution perspective, there will need to be discussions/agreement with professional accrediting bodies to ensure the sub-Bachelor qualification is of use. There will also be a significant marketing exercise to explain the value of HE sub-Bachelor qualifications to school leavers, as well as parents, younger primary and secondary students and communities in general.

- **Action:** Investigate the opportunity for portable skills-focussed HE sub-Bachelor programs (particularly Diploma and Associate Degree), particularly in areas such “Carers”, “Technologists”, “Informers” and “Designers”, as a means to provide lower-duration, flexible, HE credentials to RRR students. Any discussion will need to include major professional bodies to ensure the credential can be used in professional jobs in RRR areas.

If HE sub-Bachelor qualifications are pursued as pathways in RRR settings, then funding for sub-Bachelor qualifications must be examined. Under the Demand Driven HE system, the Commonwealth support payment structure pushed rapidly-growing universities into being very Bachelor-degree centric in its offerings (as these were the types of degrees where growth was funded). A comparison of USC program offerings in 2016 to national averages:

- Bachelor’s degree students: USC 81.1% of students versus 70.9% nationally.
- Sub-Bachelor excluding enabling: USC 0.8% of students versus 3.6% nationally.
- Postgraduate Coursework: USC 6.1% of students versus 15.5% nationally, with the national trend being growth in PGC numbers of 8% per annum (largely due to international students – domestic students accounted for less than half the cohort and grew at around 1.9%).

While there has been an increase in (designated load) sub-Bachelor places in the last year, for HE sub-degree pathways to be successful, there must be a further increase.

As a further comment on changing degree structures, note that there are challenges around sourcing placement sites for programs requiring this, particularly in health-related fields, in RRR areas, especially if the accreditation body is required to recognise placement sites and a high level acute clinical experience is required. This has been a limiting factor on the development of comprehensive health disciplines such as medicine in rural areas by rural providers. Work with accrediting bodies will be needed to overcome this problem.

- **Action:** Examine the impact of capped HE sub-Bachelor load on the development of programs appropriate for RRR settings, increasing the number of funded places is necessary.

As a final comment, relating to specific challenges in teaching in RRR areas, relaxing the TEQSA guidelines requiring AQF+1 for teaching staff would give primary and secondary school teachers the ability to teach at tertiary level within their communities, partnered and supported by University staff. It could just first year subjects or additional support for online students where the staff without AQF+1 are involved, but they would play a valuable role in the transition of secondary school students to various university locations through a program and funding.

- **Action:** Look at the potential to relax the AQF+1 requirement for teaching staff in RRR areas.

Challenge B: Financial, emotional and social challenges for students who relocate

USC acknowledges the wide range of financial, emotional and social challenges for students who relocate from RRR areas. USC, like most universities, offers a range of assistance programs for students facing acute challenges (financial, emotional, study, logistics). However, for the purposes of this Framing Paper, alleviating some of the chronic problems needs to be the target.

In terms of relocation, experience is that students who are slightly older, with slightly more work and life experience and slightly less time needed to complete study, appear more likely to be successful. Pursuing an initial credential locally, and then a Bachelor's degree through relocation and funding assistance, may help to realise this benefit.

From a financial perspective, have a Federal grant program (similar to the Colombo Plan, except for RRR-home students), would help alleviate the burden. Further to this, experience with VET block-release students from RRR settings is that accommodation in metropolitan settings, away from home, is more successful if the employer is directly involved – the employer sets expectations and measures of success for the student and is involved in conversations if the student has difficulty, for example. Students feel a connection to the home community, feel supported and feel some additional responsibility to act in their own best interests. If a RRR student travel and accommodation grant scheme was established with some involvement of the community, via employers, Councils, and community, there may be added benefit.

- **Action:** Investigate the establishment of an RRR student travel and accommodation scheme, possibly administered (but Federally funded) in partnership with RRR Councils and employers.

Related to this action, many RRR campuses or study nodes offer unique study enrichment opportunities for students based outside of the RRR area if the site or surrounding community is viewed as a “living lab”: environmental science, cultural, social welfare, health and care. An incentivised Federal travel and accommodation grant scheme for students to undertake one or more semesters of study in an RRR setting would help take advantage of this opportunity. It would also (potentially) allow metropolitan students to interact with RRR students, so that if/when the RRR students travels, they know someone at the new location.

- **Action:** As part of the student travel and accommodation scheme, look at the potential for metropolitan students to spend time at a RRR campus or study node.

As a final comment, please note again that, ideally, RRR students will take at least part of their study locally. Support for travel and accommodation follows when this is not possible.

Challenge C: Raising aspirations for tertiary education

Students from disadvantaged backgrounds are also disproportionately the first in their family to attend university, with the result that they lack family role models to encourage their aspirations towards HE and are consequently, less prepared for the student role. Despite this lack of cultural capital, research indicates that with targeted and timely support, students from low SES backgrounds can succeed at university at levels comparable to their peers (Universities Australia, 2015).

Literature suggests that an effective widening participation approach is one that tackles the complex issues surrounding low participation of specific student cohorts by concurrently addressing a number of issues, to

facilitate access, sustained progression and retention (Thomas, 2001). NCSEHE (2015) concurred that “long-term, sustained and coordinated effort” is required to effectively increase equity group participation. “Sustained and multi-faceted approaches to widening participation which are contextualised and which start as early as possible do result in building aspiration to HE and raising academic achievement levels of school children, the latter being the single most important factor in ensuring success at the tertiary level” (Stewart, 2010, p. 2).

- **Action:** Longer HE Participation and Partnership Program (HEPPP) funding cycles (ie, 3 years) to enable institutions to deliver sustained widening participation programs to regional communities.
- **Action:** If a coordinated policy platform was adopted, it may provide an opportunity for these outcomes to be achieved through a scaffolded approach with relevant age appropriate and life stage objectives and priorities.

However, prior to any realignment of public policy, there is a need nationally to change data collection and monitoring and evaluation approaches. These changes are dependent on the capability to track students’ movements over time and the necessary infrastructure at national level to implement this approach. Introduction of a Student National Identifier (primary to post-secondary), to enable collection of data across both vocational and HE to enable effective monitoring and evaluation of all approaches to determine effectiveness of programs and most appropriate expenditure of public funding.

In considering the challenge of raising aspirations for tertiary education, it is useful to first consider that market research (privately commissioned by USC, as well as in the public domain such as in considering student choice in the UK) suggests that students can be roughly divided into two categories: those looking to attend a “prestige” institution, and those looking to attend university for employment (and more general lifestyle) opportunities. The decision-making behaviours of these two groups are different. For the “prestige” group, the drivers of decision-making are university rankings and the opportunity to interact with the highest-quality staff and students. The “prestige” group is less sensitive to price, distance to travel to attend university, and other logistical concerns (eg, the students who travel to Canberra to attend ANU). For the “employment” group, while obvious factors such as degree choice are important, there is significant sensitivity around price and flexibility of study.

- **Observation:** the drivers of student decision making and sensitivity to potential impediments are different for students (including RRR students) seeking a “prestige” institution and students seeking to attend university primarily for advancement of employment opportunities.

In Queensland, UQ is the prestige institution, and (USC-commissioned) conjoint testing suggest that financial and logistical challenges matter less to students focussed on UQ study. At least in the USC catchment, all other universities behave as “employment” institutions.

- **Action:** Undertake a national study (desktop and/or primary research) to better understand and segment the decision making and choice sensitivities of RRR students.

For South East Queensland, the most important drivers of choice (from market research) are: qualification offered, quality of teaching, enhancement of career prospects, tuition fees, academic reputation and realistic entry criteria.

When considering the first of these drivers, what disciplines interest young people in the latter stages of high school, as compared to what interests their parents, regarding career choice is of interest.

<i>Areas of university study being considered by school students and parents in SE Queensland.</i>		
Desired Area of Study	School Students Considering	Parents Considering

Business and economics	11%	16%
Art and design	11%	4%
Engineering	9%	10%
Science	9%	3%
Humanities, psychology and social sciences	9%	6%
Nursing and allied health	8%	8%
Sports science	7%	6%
IT	3%	12%

Data in the table above is from market research commissioned by USC to examine study preferences in SE Queensland. Note particularly that there is a large discrepancy between the interest in science for school students and their parents (likely parents would not encourage students to pursue science), as well as IT (school students would resist). Therefore, any aspiration-raising initiative must include parents, such as through some form of community awareness-raising about opportunities in science.

- **Action:** Look at a broad aspiration-raising campaign for RRR areas, including parents and potential students, addressing career opportunities as well as logistical concerns.
- **Action:** Look at providing education scholarships for students to study on placement in RRR areas with an incentive to provide visible role models in community.
- **Action:** Look at forming communities of practice for RRR professionals either de novo, or by supporting professional bodies and networks such as UDRHs to connect individuals. These communities of practice will have an aspiration raising role in the broader RRR area.

For information, adults have a different mix of university education preferences, although a catalogue of Diploma offerings would still provide adequate coverage. Adult re-skilling would also benefit from additional non-designated student load in areas such as Graduate Certificates.

<i>Areas of university study being considered by adults in SE Queensland.</i>	
Desired Area of Study	Percentage Considering
Business and economics	23%
Education	12%
Humanities, psychology and social sciences	11%
Nursing and allied health	11%
IT	10%
Engineering	7%
Science	6%

Adults also required greater flexibility in study times. This is reflected in the desired mode of study, also known from this research: 33% fully online, 43% a mix of online and on-campus, and 24% mostly on-campus.

Market research points to other areas of high importance:

- A dedicated access centre that offers face-to-face instruction and support for online.
- Short travel time, ideally under 30 minutes.

- Recorded lectures and no residential components (residential school in first week helps build learning community).
- A combination of virtual and physical campuses.
- Adult-to-adult interaction.

The effectiveness of youth mentoring programs was identified by Rogers (2010) as an effective informal and nonthreatening strategy to communicate career possibilities and academic requirements to potential students Kaehne et al. (2014), although it was also noted that to be successful, mentoring programs require significant resourcing and support (Moore et al., 2013; Rogers, 2010). A RRR program that encourages successful University Alumni in targeted disciplines from RRR areas to return to their community to champion tertiary education, could be considered (eg, an extension of the Tall Poppy program in South Australia). Such a program has the potential to change cultural capital in regard to HE and raise the capacity to aspire. Having spokespeople from “the city” come into a community and talk about going to university may not assist in changing cultural capital of communities, as opposed to “Local Heroes” who have been financially and emotionally supported to be successful at university, who then return to work, teach, care from within the community.

Through the work of the Queensland Widening Participation Consortium: Student Ambassador investigation in 2015, there is evidence to show that utilising Student Ambassadors to return to their community for WP programs, not only build aspirations for participants but also develops employability skills for university students.

- **Action:** Support the sponsorship of “Local Heroes” or “Tall Poppies” who reside in or return to their home community to champion tertiary education.
- **Action:** HEPPP funding to be continued to ensure the continued delivery of Widening Participation Student Ambassador engagement in regional and remote communities.

Challenge D: RRR students often face multiple forms of disadvantage

Ideally, initiatives to improve RRR tertiary education would involve the alignment of economic, social, health and education policies (somewhat challenging). However, there may be some advantage in simply starting with broadening the rhetoric away from just “education” – perhaps “transition from school to the contemporary work environment”. “Future employment opportunities” is the overwhelming reason people continue study.

Much is being written about society’s movement away from a “collective identity” and towards a focus on “personal autonomy and individuality”. To match this, the focus of HE should also shift from “human capital development” to “development of individual skillsets and resources”. Modern society requires from young people greater responsibility in constructing their own life portfolios, and demands from them greater flexibility in work. It is not uncommon to find rhetoric stating that existing, traditional university degrees or vocational education and training programs provide the skillsets and instil a way of thinking that equips young people to meet modern life challenges, and to an extent this is true. However, for many RRR communities, remediation of the current poor statistics will require a more bespoke approach.

In a similar vein, young people often view their inevitable life speedbumps as individual failures. They can feel strongly responsible for not successfully achieving the transition into the workforce. This is reflected in the perception of a more stressed university student population, and rapidly expanding mental health presentations at universities. It also provides some insight into the additional support structures that will be required to achieve success in RRR communities and with RRR students, where many young people have barely started along the transition pathway.

- **Action:** Broaden the rhetoric away from “education”, and towards “transition to the contemporary work environment”. Initiatives that flow from any national strategy should be similarly broad.

The above scenario suggests the following as important ingredients for addressing the challenges of multiple forms of disadvantage:

- A wider range of program offerings to improve tertiary education, accessibility, and credential acquisition, augmenting the Bachelor-level programs.
- Additional counselling and support staff at campuses.
- Accommodation and travel support programs (out of, and into, RRR communities).
- Secondary school teacher professional development and partnership programs.
- Greater involvement with community organisations and local employers.
- Campus infrastructure available within 30-45 minutes of travel.
- Commencement of focussed research into the social welfare of regions, to ensure programs and interventions are appropriately prioritised and efficacious.

Challenge E: Attracting people and jobs to RRR areas

Attracting people and jobs to RRR areas is obvious advantageous to the region. Suggestions for travel programs in and out of RRR areas have already been discussed, as has the need to form communities of practice for professionals.

In SE Queensland RRR areas, the major areas of employment are reasonably consistent: healthcare and social assistance, retail trade, education and training, accommodation and food services, construction, manufacturing. The details will be different in different RRR areas, particularly where mining is present, but particularly healthcare, retail and education and training will usually appear in the top five.

Tertiary education initiatives can play a part in developing these industries – such integration is currently being explored in Pilot Project Regional Deals. International students, university staff, domestic students coming to an RRR area for an enrichment experience, etc, are all possible in a coordinated manner. For example, USC has to limit the number of international students at the RRR campus because of placement opportunities – additional placements that would flow from other regional development initiatives would facilitate additional international student recruitment. Formalising integration opportunities is key.

- **Action:** Look at other Federal and State development programs for the potential for (formally) integrating university RRR campus and degree program offerings, such as in Regional Deals and/or formation of alliances between universities in regional locations.

As a final comment, the Regional Innovation paradox is a well identified phenomenon where the location that needs most significant investment is limited in its capability to meaningfully absorb it. RRR communities often display entrepreneurial activity and rural ingenuity that could be captured as part of the entrepreneurial activity of Australia. Doing so has the potential to assist with employment development in RRR communities, helping address disadvantage.

- **Action:** Develop two-way forum for metro/RRR entrepreneurship that can lead into mutual benefit for innovation and increase self-employment.

Challenge F: Implementing and monitoring a national strategy

There is a need for a National Strategy that is linked to sustainable public policy, funding and national data sets. Prior to any realignment of public policy, there is a need nationally to change data collection and monitoring and evaluation approaches. These changes are dependent on the capability to track students' movements over time and the necessary infrastructure at national level to implement this approach.

USC supports the directions suggested in the Framing Paper, acknowledging the value in establishing a National Regional Education Commissioner to oversee the strategy. This role provides an opportunity to develop a national narrative around RRR, bringing together for the first time a comprehensive and standardised approach to matters related to HE for individuals and communities in RRR Australia.

It is acknowledged that current data sets nationally do not adequately measure 'student success'. The current quantitative measure of success used by the Commonwealth is based on the proportion of passed equivalent full-time student load (EFTSL). Whilst this measure is important, a multi-dimensional approach as outlined in the [Shaping the 21st century student experience at regional universities](#) (Nelson et al. 2018) identifies that an additional set of metrics is required to more accurately measure student experience and assess the impact of institutional practices on the student experience and success.

The advice for the sector outlined in the paper are set out below and could form the basis of institutional measures that are consistent nationally:

- Provide access to information about students' movements, over time and among institutions.
- Review the learner engagement scale in the Student Experience Survey, to ensure the collection of data is aligned with contemporary understandings of student engagement.
- Review indicators in the Student Experience Survey, the Graduate Outcome Survey, the Course Experience Questionnaire and the Employer Satisfaction Survey to ensure the collection of information about students' outcomes, experiences and skills is aligned with the key findings of this study.

Importantly, when defining 'student success' there is a need to include students in the processes. Student as Partners may hold the key to identifying and further defining specific measures of success.

Across the sector rich qualitative and quantitative data has been used to tell compelling narratives for other equity initiatives and could form a key component of any future framework. The Regional Universities Network Performance Framework provides some insights into how quantitative and qualitative data could be developed and used within a framework that recognises the diverse nature of HE institutions. Promoting the lived-experiences of students from RRR locations and backgrounds, normalises the HE experience of diverse populations; robust metrics validates the experiences as being impactful. With access to information about students' movements, over time and among institutions, it would provide education providers with the ability to offer pre-established support to increase student engagement and impact on student success.

- **Action:** Formulation of the strategy should be oversighted by the Commissioner with consultation and input from Institutions and communities who identify as RRR.
- **Action:** Introduction of a Student National Identifier (primary to post-secondary), to enable collection of data across both vocational and HE to enable effective monitoring and evaluation of all approaches to determine effectiveness of programs and most appropriate expenditure of public funding.

The clear evidence that a disproportionate number of leaders have emerged from RRR backgrounds points to RRR peoples having a resilience, adaptability and willingness to be pragmatic with an authentic style of leadership.

- **Action:** leaders from RRR Australia are consulted and involved in the generation of a National Strategy.