

# Response to National Regional, Rural and Remote Education Strategy Framing Paper

## The University of Western Australia

UWA was founded in 1911 with a mission of serving the community of Western Australia and creating opportunities for all students to fulfil their potential through access to a world-class education. This commitment to equity continues today with a strong commitment to supporting disadvantaged students to access and succeed at university, particularly those from regional, rural and remote areas of our vast state and country.

We appreciate the opportunity to comment on the National Regional, Rural and Remote Education Strategy Framing Paper. Significant investment by the Australian Government has led to improvements in the university participation rates of low socio-economic, disability and Indigenous students. However the participation rates of regional and remote students has remained static<sup>1</sup>.

At UWA, there has been significant investment in the delivery of quality outreach programs to some of the most remote locations in Western Australia, as well provision of education regionally through the Albany Campus. The Western Australian universities have also recently committed and are working together on improving regional and remote study options through shared utilisation of existing regional campus locations and taking a collaborative approach to widening participation to ensure comprehensive coverage of the state.

To help ensure regional, rural and remote students aspiring to higher education can have the same opportunities as their metropolitan peers, The University is providing the following feedback and recommendations:

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

#### **What opportunities exist to expand options for further study in RRR areas?**

WA universities have invested in and focussed their outreach programs on raising aspirations and support students to relocate from RRR areas to City campuses. The significant burden of re-location on students and families is well documented and yet with a State as large as WA, the possibility of supporting students to study from their own region has proven a very difficult one to visualise.

UWA has committed to a regional campus in Albany which supports students across a range of undergraduate and post graduate degrees. Structures and processes have been developed to best support students who live in the Great Southern Region as well as providing a structure to support the transition to Perth for those who require a program not offered in the region. For instance, the first year of almost every undergraduate degree is offered locally (delivered from the region). This practice means that school leavers have the opportunity to stay at home for at least the first year of their degree. This alleviates financial pressure, provides a transition to university study before the need to

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<sup>1</sup> Koshy, P. (2017). Student Equity Performance in Australian Higher Education: 2011 to 2016. Perth, National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE), Curtin University.

relocate and provides students with a social support network when they first arrive in Perth (as they usually relocate in groups).

The UWA presence in Albany has provided opportunity for cross-university collaboration. An example is the UWA/ Curtin agreement which provides a face-to-face learning experience for local students who wish to pursue an education degree. UWA has also worked with the local VET provider to create articulation pathways such as the pathway from a Diploma of Management into the UWA Commerce degree.

This model is not one that can be easily replicated to cover every regional and remote area of WA. To this end, UWA is currently developing a Regional Strategy of its own, to try to better address the diverse needs of RRR communities. As part of that strategy, UWA is looking at developing a supported online degree (multi-disciplinary; across both Arts and Science) that includes a focus on transferable skills and work place integration. The degree will provide the opportunity for travel to engage in regional area, field study and industry participation. UWA commends recent Government funding to establish and support additional regional and remote study hubs.

**Recommendation:** Focus and funding to improve internet access and support in RRR areas.

**Recommendation:** Support industry and government incentives for RRR students who complete their degree in regional locations, including internship opportunities.

**Recommendation:** Support universities to improve facilities and maximise campus use 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?**

We know that many students in RRR areas who are capable of university entry may be initially attracted to a local VET course. Articulation arrangements vary between institutions and whilst each institution should maintain the right to set its own entry criteria, there is room for a regional approach to ensure consistent quality and access through VET articulation pathways, supported by the AQF.

**Recommendation:** Support universities to create and maintain VET articulation pathways to increase RRR student access

## **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?**

Students face significant financial burden when relocating for study and are more likely to work while studying<sup>2</sup>. Consequently this can add more pressure and strain on their study, limiting their

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<sup>2</sup> Naylor, R., C. Baik and R. James. (2013). "Developing a Critical Interventions Framework for advancing equity in Australian higher education." from <http://www.ncsehe.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/CriticalInterventionsFrameworkDiscussionPaper.pdf>; Freeman, B., M. Klatt and J. Polesel (2014). Deferring a university offer in regional Victoria: final report, Youth Affairs Council of Victoria.

ability to socialise and participate in co-curricula activities, negatively impacting retention rates<sup>3</sup>. In order to help students' transition and success it is important that the government address the financial challenges regional and remote students face in meeting living costs associated with relocation.

The University commends the Australian Government on the establishment of the Rural and Regional Enterprise Scholarships program. As a university with a growing number of regional and remote students we strongly support this initiative and the valuable support it will provide potential students as they prepare to transition into tertiary study. It was also commendable that these scholarships utilise the remote classification to recognise levels of disadvantage.

The Independent Youth Allowance criteria is created in a manner that further disadvantages students from an RRR area where there is no local provision of education services. To be financially viable, many students may be unable to leave their RRR area for study until they deem themselves independent of their parents, thereby denying students from RRR areas the capacity to take up study until they can afford to relocate.

For students who have access to tertiary study either via a local campus or via online enrolment, the financial issue is still palpable. It is often difficult to get part time work in regional or remote areas and even when students are local they often need to leave the family farm/ station to access a campus or study hub. For these students who cannot yet deem themselves independent there is no rent assistance available and no financial support to study.

**Recommendation:** Investigate further changes to Youth Allowance criteria to ensure students from RRR areas have access to this support to undertake their preferred study options without needing to defer their studies

**Recommendation:** Continuation of the Rural and Regional Enterprise Scholarships program

**Recommendation:** The Australian Government, through the Department of Social Services convert the start-up loan back to a scholarship providing up to \$2050 a year to students to help fund upfront expenses associated with study.

### **How can universities assist RRR students to feel like they belong on their campus?**

It is important to ensure students can establish a sense of belonging at the campus of their choice – whether this be in their local RRR community or if they relocate to a city campus. If a support structure can manage to keep students in their own communities (for at least part of their degree) then there are positive ramifications for the individual student as well as the community. The issues associated with re-location are negated or at least minimised and advantages for regional and remote areas are realised.

For those willing to relocate, overcoming financial challenges is vital, and then the other issues of emotional/social and cultural disconnect need to be addressed. UWA is unique in WA for our residential colleges program that enhances the student experience and fosters strong relations with The University. The National Rent Affordability Scheme has allowed the residential colleges affiliated with UWA to provide significantly more rooms for students, and prioritise accommodation options for students from RRR areas.

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<sup>3</sup> Regional (10.1%) and remote students (14.9%) have higher first year attrition rates than metropolitan students (7.1%) (Department of Education and Training 2017); Richardson, S., D. Bennett and L. Roberts (2016). Investigating the relationship between equity and graduate outcomes in Australia, National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, Curtin University.

The UWA Uni Mentor program supports students by matching them with a staff member or postgraduate student who will provide academic direction, especially as students transition into a new course (or a new environment). By facilitating greater communication between students and staff, we are improving the beginning of students academic journey and enhancing their sense of belonging within the University.

**Recommendation:** Support students to stay in their home communities for at least part of their degree

**Recommendation:** Building on the success of NRAS, develop a tailored scheme specifically for universities to support further access to affordable accommodation for students from RRR areas

**Recommendation:** Provide support for universities to provide dedicated orientation and transition support for RRR students that directly links to student and course advisors, counselling support and other support networks on the campus.

## Challenge C: Raising aspirations for tertiary education

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

University outreach programs play a vital role in connecting schools and their students with universities; and supporting a successful transition experience. The Department of Education's Higher Education Participation and Partnership (HEPPP) scheme has allowed for the development and expansion of outreach programs throughout Australia facilitating connections between schools, universities, philanthropic organisations and corporates.

At UWA, Aspire has developed 63 partnerships with schools throughout WA, 43 of which are in regional and remote communities. Achieving cultural change in schools to raise expectations of high academic performance and normalise the goal of higher education is challenging, however in consecutive partner school surveys, school staff identified marked improvements in attitudes to higher education that they attributed to Aspire's influence.

We also recognise the need start building aspirations from an early age, and as such are investing in the implementation of new initiatives to engage students from the start of primary school. One of these is the introduction of a Children's University which will operate in at least one regional area in WA.

In the Great Southern a forum of local, regional and rural school principals have joined with UWA Albany Campus to work together on the issue of student low aspiration and better awareness of career choices. This is currently being conducted with no funding at all. It relies on the good will of people who care about disadvantaged rural and regional students.

The current model of HEPPP funding which is based on participation numbers of students from low socio-economic areas, does not recognise the higher costs to deliver outreach to regional and remote students in large states such as Western Australia. Our state is over two and a half million square kilometres and the costs of providing outreach to remote areas is substantial. The current model

effectively penalises the most remote students and Indigenous Australians in particular as over 60% of Aboriginal people in Western Australia live in regional or remote areas<sup>4</sup>.

The National Priority Pool has allowed for significant developments in research and innovation, and we commend the Government for continuing to drive this through commissioned NPP projects. We believe there is also significant value from allowing institutions and consortiums to propose projects. UWA has previously been awarded three competitive grants through the through the National Priority Pool program with the explicit aim of fostering innovative practice. All three have been successfully implemented, resulting in innovative approaches being embedded into outreach programs at UWA; allowing programs to continue to respond to the needs of students and be reflective of the latest research.

**Recommendation:** Fund quality early childhood education and outreach programs, to ensure RRR students have aspiration, awareness and access to post-secondary options on par with metropolitan peers

**Recommendation:** Adjust HEPPP funding model to account for significant additional costs of outreach to the most regional and remote locations.

**Recommendation:** Provide consistent and long term investment to increase certainty for regional communities benefitting from university outreach programs.

**Recommendation:** The continuation of NPP grants, with flexibility for institutions and consortiums to propose projects to drive innovation in widening participations programs, helping to provide more opportunities for disadvantaged Australian students to be supported to access and succeed in Higher Education.

## 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?**

Many students identify with more than one equity group. Government and university programs need to prioritise students who are most disadvantaged, responding to their unique and often multifaceted needs.

The introduction of a Universal Student Indicator would help facilitate this. It would generate the possibility of linking previously unlinked datasets, enabling universities the opportunity to provide a more holistic and tailored support and help students to move seamlessly between systems and levels of study.

**Recommendation:** Prioritise the implementation of a Universal Student Indicator.

### **How can we better support Indigenous people from RRR areas to access and succeed in tertiary education?**

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<sup>4</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, "4705.0 - Population Distribution, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, 2006", August 15, 2007, accessed May 31, 2017, <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/4705.0>

UWA offers a comprehensive and diverse range of outreach programs specifically for Indigenous students in Years 7-12 to encourage them to see university as an achievable goal, make informed study choices and complete secondary studies. The programs identify Indigenous students early and build ongoing relationships throughout secondary school. On average, 60-70% of Indigenous students attending residential outreach programs are from regional areas. Integral to the success of the program is the involvement of Indigenous students from UWA, many of whom are recent school leavers themselves, and Indigenous graduates as role models, mentors and supervisors.

Indigenous students from RRR areas who need to relocate to study if they are to access the full range of University courses (such as Medicine) need significant financial support to meet the high costs of accommodation and living away from home. An increasing number of Indigenous students miss the threshold for Abstudy.

**Recommendation:** Outreach programs for Indigenous students in RRR areas are critical and need to begin early to build relationships. Funding support should recognise particularly high costs of outreach in large states, such as WA.

**Recommendation:** Indigenous students need greater access to and higher levels of financial support to access and succeed in tertiary education. Abstudy (or Youth Allowance) for Indigenous students needs to recognise and address this.

## **Challenge E: Attracting people and jobs to RRR areas**

### **How can tertiary education providers further stimulate economic growth in RRR areas?**

Since 2000, the Rural Direct Pathway to Medicine and Dentistry 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.

The program works closely with The Rural Clinical School of WA (RCSWA), which helps rural communities sustain a locally trained and loyal medical workforce by placing medical students in country regions. Under the program, students gain valuable hands-on experience, enjoy close mentoring and are more likely to return to rural towns after they graduate. The RCSWA aims to drive a larger presence of doctors into country towns that face health and medical welfare challenges, while giving student doctors the chance to learn from real-life experiences. Peer-reviewed research shows students who undertake an RCSWA placement are four times more likely to return to work in the country compared to others.

**Recommendation:** Build on the success of the Rural Direct Pathway and RCSWA model through further funding and expansion across the country.

### **What actions would further strengthen and increase the attractiveness of regional universities?**

There are many global examples of the role that regional university campuses can play in attracting staff and students to regional areas and the resulting economic impact that has on regional (and national) communities. It will take a cultural shift to realise this potential in Australia but with a

growing capacity to conduct research from any corner of the earth and with increased connections to metropolitan services, the time is right to start the cultural walk.

Strengthening the capacity of the current regional campuses and supporting their research capabilities is a priority.

**Recommendation:** Scholarships to study regionally. These might be sourced from local government and industries who would benefit from the increased activity in the region.

**Recommendation:** Support work integrated learning opportunities with local industries and professional business.

**Recommendation:** Offer reduced fees for students to study in regional locations to attract students to regional campuses for the entirety of their degree.

UWA welcomes the development of this strategy and work being done to ensure support for regional, rural and remote students to access and succeed in university, for the benefit of individual students, RRR communities and Australia. We look forward to the opportunity to continue to work with you and colleagues across the sector to implement programs that support students to achieve their higher education goals.

Yours Sincerely,

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The University of Western Australia.