# Feedback from Australian Catholic University (ACU) in response to the *Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education - Discussion Paper: July 2017*

## August 2017

Australian Catholic University (ACU) provided the following feedback to the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education, in relation to the nine themes raised for consultation in its Discussion Paper (July 2017).[1]

**THEME 1 - Curriculum and assessment**

Issues that require particular attention with respect to regional, rural and remote (RRR) education in the context of the Australian Curriculum and assessment include the following:

- Professional development (PD) for teachers: Ensuring quality education and delivery of curriculum in RRR schools requires having the best teachers in place. Additional opportunities and assistance to support teachers in RRR locations to engage in further study, seminars, and professional subject events (e.g. Teachers Associations in English) are needed. Distance should not limit teachers from accessing PD, especially those considered by teachers in metropolitan areas to be additional and value-adding.
- Technological divide: Many teachers do not have access to adequate communications technologies outside of school. As an anecdotal example, a group of school teachers in a rural context recently reported needing to abandon using 'Skoolbag' (message application to update parents) as there was virtually no mobile/internet coverage more than 100m from the school.
- Transport/logistics: While students in metropolitan areas can often readily access and continue learning outside formal hours, this is much more challenging for RRR students. Fewer transport options can mean that RRR students are less able to remain at school for longer to access additional resources. This not only affects formal learning options but also their ability to access the full suite of educational opportunities including social and cultural activities e.g. sport, debating, choir.

Innovative practice with respect to curriculum and assessment of particular note include:

- Digital collaborative technologies enable some schools to 'pool' resources, especially in language education, to ensure that students can choose a variety of subjects and access highly proficient teachers in the field. The Catholic Archdiocese of Canberra and Goulburn has made progress in this area.
- Marking centres and rural and remote marking schemes for systems with external assessment - these facilitate vital teacher learning/PD, providing the experience of marking at a high level, engagement with a wider range of teachers in the discipline, and reviewing the standards applied in a 'live' setting. Extension of these schemes to NAPLAN assessments and marking could greatly assist the proficiency of teachers in preparing students for assessments.

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[1] Halsey, J., *Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education – Discussion Paper: July 2017* (2017). Accessible via https://docs.education.gov.au/documents/discussion-paper-independent-review-regional-rural-and-remote-education

**To improve the achievement of students and their transition to further study, training and employment, how important is it to focus on curriculum and assessment?** *Choose from 0 (not important) to 7 (very important) - please highlight your selection below:*
     *0 1 2 3 4 5 <mark>6</mark> 7*

**THEME 2 - Teachers and teaching**

Better investment is needed in programs and incentives to attract quality teachers to RRR schools. In some states, additional remuneration and improved conditions are helping to attract 'top teachers'; for example, the approach adopted in Western Australia to offer additional allowances for relocation, housing expenses, and additional leave. More broadly, the use of incentives such as financial, accelerated promotion, rental and housing subsidies, guaranteed rights of return and extra professional development would serve to attract and retain more teachers.

An effective way for pre-service teachers to gain in-depth experience of what it would be like to teach in a RRR school is through a teaching practice placement; particularly over an extended period of time. Financial support is needed to facilitate more of these experiences e.g. scholarships. This would also present more opportunities for employers to recruit and retain new staff if students have a positive experience.

The following practices and opportunities would further support a high quality RRR teaching workforce:
- Enabling more RRR teachers to undertake further study (e.g. Masters of Education), particularly to assist those teaching outside their field of professional preparation which can be prevalent in small rural schools. Some universities offer short courses, certificate programs and degrees within rural and remote settings, while others, like ACU, have a robust 'away from base' model, which could be used more extensively.
- Ensuring access to high quality, relevant, regular and affordable professional development to build and sustain teacher effectiveness.
- Improved access to technology and high quality, high speed internet (e.g. through government assistance or subsidies) would support greater localised professional development. Better connectivity would also make RRR communities more attractive to teachers.
- Targeted approaches (e.g. COSA (collaboration on student achievement)), which assist school communities to develop their own professional learning community have been shown to bring significant improvements in student outcomes and higher staff satisfaction.
- 'Incursion' models (ways of bringing expertise into communities), fly-in-fly-out (FIFO) teaching arrangements, along with team approaches to teaching can benefit RRR schools.
- Sharing of success 'stories' and innovations in learning and teaching in RRR schools would contribute to teacher esteem and standing within the profession.

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     *0 1 2 3 4 5 6 <mark>7</mark>*

**THEME 3 - Leaders and leadership**

Attracting and retaining high quality, experienced education leaders to RRR communities requires additional resourcing to ensure pay parity, provide for ongoing engagement with peers, and to ensure that the reduced day-to-day opportunities are supplemented with options for more extensive and intensive skills development. Many RRR schools have dedicated principals who also need to engage in direct classroom practice: they are in every sense 'instructional leaders'. Principals in RRR schools are, at the very least, often a school's most reliable source of relief teacher, which places further demand on principals' time and skills. The levels of support, encouragement and opportunity supplied to these leaders is more limited than their metropolitan counterparts. Often the smaller student numbers in RRR schools can mean lower salary levels despite, arguably, more demanding roles.

An option explored in Queensland that is worthy of wider use is the provision of professional coaches and professional supervision to enable and support effective leadership within RRR communities. There is considerable evidence in the literature that this kind of intervention improves the skills of educational leaders, and through them, substantially improves key performance indicators in schools – especially in terms of retention and academic progress. A similar option, more common in the UK, is for clusters of principals to have a designated principal-mentor - a senior and experienced person - who assists (especially new) principals to develop their skills base. This would have considerable merit in RRR communities where knowing the unique challenges of the setting is as important as the challenges of educational leadership.

Extra financial assistance and support for principals through such means as locality allowances to compensate for extra day-to-day living costs, low interest on homes, along with specialised education and postgraduate programs to prepare principals and leaders for RRR contexts, are also important to support high quality leadership in RRR schools. It is important to recognise that the education systems have a significant impact on growing leadership, and they need to ensure strong support and professional development programs to prepare leaders for RRR placements.

**To improve the achievement of students and their transition to further study, training and employment, how important is it to focus on leaders and leadership?** *Choose from 0 (not important) to 7 (very important) - please highlight your selection below:*
        *0 1 2 3 4 5 6* <mark>*7*</mark>

**THEME 4 - School and community**

Initiatives and assistance to support the location of university campuses in RRR communities, and work-integrated learning (WIL), can improve the connection between schools and the community.

The presence of universities or university campuses in local communities contributes to the ability of regional and rural communities to attract and retain professionals. ACU has a long-standing commitment to its two regional campuses; even though this has been at significant expense to the University. It is important to note that the Government's current proposal to cut university funding will put further pressure on these campuses, as well as on RRR campuses maintained by other universities.

At its Canberra Campus, in response to requests from rural communities, ACU provides assistance to facilitate WIL placements within rural communities. These relatively limited funds (maximum $1500 per student on application) have supported students in nursing, paramedicine, education and social work to engage with rural communities during their courses. Students may not undertake the placement within their home communities (as they may do this anyway) but are assisted with travel, accommodation and other support costs. Over the last 7 years more than 50 students have taken up this opportunity, and many go on to take up appointments in RRR communities after graduation - a high proportion in the setting where they completed their WIL placement. This program has cost ACU a maximum of $20,000 per year and has produced excellent results, including direct benefits to community professionals in having the opportunity to supervise ACU placements.

Support for differential learning in delivering the curriculum is also important. Furthermore, in addition to entrepreneurial education, skills formation is important for RRR students and the overall human capital of communities more broadly. Initiatives at Calen District State College (rural Queensland) are a good example of this in operation.

With respect to philanthropy, it is true that there is a role for the philanthropic sector to play in improving outcomes for RRR students in relation to school achievements and post-school transition, however the first level of responsibility in this area lies with sector leaders e.g. Departments of Education, Catholic Education Office etc.

**To improve the achievement of students and their transition to further study, training and employment, how important is it to focus on school and community?** *Choose from 0 (not important) to 7 (very important) - please highlight your selection below:*
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**THEME 5 - Information and communication technology**

It is incumbent on Government to ensure that the digital and communications divide between RRR and metropolitan communities is bridged, by ensuring that size and scale are not limitations preventing, often smaller, rural and remote schools from accessing and utilising such technologies. In terms of significant barriers to realising the full benefits of ICT for RRR students, the barriers are predominantly linked to reliable, fast, and affordable broadband both within school and at home. Adequate staffing and remuneration are also barriers to RRR schools realising the full potential and benefits of ICT. This could be addressed through additional positions and/or professional learning, along with implementing initiatives such as 'train-the-trainer' models which have assisted many schools to invest in some staff to enrich whole school communities. Targeting additional expenditure where it can achieve positive outcomes is more crucial than merely dispensing larger amounts of money.

Evidence suggests that most primary school teachers are able to use technology creatively and flexibly with appropriate support. Rural and regional schools have supported small groups of staff to attend iPad and application developer conferences, where learning and familiarity with the device goes hand in hand. Such teachers have empowered their students to demonstrate powerful additional learning building on the capacities of the technologies even with limited extra curricula access to broadband.

Many schools have adequate broadband on site and also run good quality Bring-Your-Own-Device (BYOD) programs, which facilitates access to the latest in educational technologies and enables students to be in a 'common classroom' with their city counterparts. However, it is particularly outside of the school precinct that many RRR students are disadvantaged with respect to ICT. Sky Muster based broadband is expensive and not as reliable as the alternatives available in the cities. A legislated Universal Service Obligation on the NBN would have a profound impact on student learning, achievement and outcomes in RRR areas; it would also boost the options for return to home style communities. Regretfully, the Government has removed this requirement.

**To improve the achievement of students and their transition to further study, training and employment, how important is it to focus on information and communication technology?**
*Choose from 0 (not important) to 7 (very important) - please highlight your selection below:*
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**THEME 6 - Entrepreneurship and schools**

ACU endorses the measures outlined in the Discussion Paper (p.35 citing Gibbs, 2007) with respect to developing a culture for learning about entrepreneurship and becoming an entrepreneur through education. Furthermore, a flexible curriculum, expert teachers, and good partnerships with industry are the kinds of support and resources that are needed for a school or group of schools to specialise in entrepreneurial education.

**THEME 7 - Improving access – enrolments, clusters, distance education and boarding**

See comments under Theme 1, including on technology and support for teachers. Additional comments are below.

Clusters of schools have already made significant improvements in being able to offer career progression and collaboration through peer support or professional development for RRR teachers. However, the more remote schools are from each other, the fewer options that can be achieved in this regard. Most Catholic systems with rural schools already arrange schools and their support systems (e.g. Principal groups, regional meetings etc.) in clusters; a number of state jurisdictions also do this to some extent. Where possible in some communities, State and Non-Government schools share curricula and teachers in order to offer difficult to staff or low number cohort subjects (e.g. higher sciences, mathematics, and languages).

For some students, the only option to pursue education is to leave their local communities for schooling and/or university. These choices have a significant impact on families and local communities, which then have the arduous task of attempting to attract such students/graduates back to these communities. Boarding schools offer good opportunities for students from RRR communities to study within highly motivated and competitive settings. Evidently, relatively small numbers of students attending metropolitan boarding schools return to their local communities after secondary and tertiary education in the city. An option for boarding which seems to retain talent in rural and remote communities is regional boarding schools which facilitate predominantly weekly boarding, enabling students to still spend weekends in their local communities. These students frequently go on to attend regional universities or regional campuses of universities. At ACU's Canberra Campus around 50% of the enrolments are from rural and regional centres (outside Canberra) and of these, between 10% and 20%

are students who have attended regional boarding schools. Students choosing a regional boarding school, followed by a regional university experience, maximises the chances of the students remaining in rural and remote communities following graduation.

**To improve the achievement of students and their transition to further study, training and employment, how important is it to focus on enrolments?** *Choose from 0 (not important) to 7 (very important) - please highlight your selection below:*
>    *0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7*

**To improve the achievement of students and their transition to further study, training and employment, how important is it to focus on clusters?** *Choose from 0 (not important) to 7 (very important) - please highlight your selection below:*
>    *0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7*

**To improve the achievement of students and their transition to further study, training and employment, how important is it to focus on distance education?** *Choose from 0 (not important) to 7 (very important) - please highlight your selection below:*
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**To improve the achievement of students and their transition to further study, training and employment, how important is it to focus on boarding?** *Choose from 0 (not important) to 7 (very important) - please highlight your selection below:*
>    *0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7*

## THEME 8 - Diversity

A major challenge for schools in RRR communities is meeting the diversity of learning needs, interests and aspirations of all students, while at the same time, developing and nurturing social cohesion and harmony. The following are observations and suggestions to address issues raised in the Discussion Paper in this respect:

- Educational initiatives, particularly in remote communities, should recognise the role of education in facilitating the development of human resources to grow strong communities, and not just the transmission of content; as reflected in the findings of the Red Dirt education project. In some settings, curriculum such as the International Baccalaureate may be more appropriate. There is also an important role for parent and community involvement in education, which is key to enhancing student completion, retention and achievements. More broadly, location should not be a barrier to providing quality education to RRR students.
- Investing in a combination of expert teachers, graduate teachers, and para professional local staff can deliver high quality RRR learning environments and outcomes, and to build strong local communities.
- Technology can assist to provide students with access to specialist assistance, to support their learning and development.
- Multi-grade classrooms foster differentiated learning; significantly, they require strong teachers to be facilitated successfully.
- As the Discussion Paper identifies, successful teachers are ones who are passionate, committed, patient, caring, respectful, and are able to listen to students and school

communities. It is important that government invests in teachers as life-long learners, providing support and ongoing professional development through their careers.

- With respect to improving education outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander in particular, directing new/further funding to the More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teachers Initiative (MATSITI) project to focus on the four 'Closing the Gap' targets for education articulated by COAG (Discussion Paper, p.41) could be beneficial.
- Acknowledging the premise that, in remote communities, 'a good induction and professional development approach would allow local people to do the training for non-locals' (Discussion Paper, p.43), sub-bachelor courses for these individuals could be particularly beneficial and serve to build local talent.

**THEME 9 - Transitioning beyond school**

The following measures could serve to assist in improving post-school opportunities for young people from RRR communities and to aid transition beyond school:

- More investment in the highly effective Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Programme (HEPPP) – initiatives facilitated by the HEPPP have been effective in creating greater awareness, raising aspirations, and assisting prospective students from RRR areas to explore pathways to university. HEPPP initiatives include important outreach programmes to improve access and participation in undergraduate courses. Research already shows the significant economic and non-financial benefits HEPPP initiatives can deliver to graduates and the broader community by supporting students to access and attain a university education (e.g. see KPMG, *Evaluation of Bridges to Higher Education – Final Report* (2015)).
- More broadly, raising greater awareness of, and support for, pathways into higher education – for example, pathways through internships and apprenticeships funded by government and business, and vocational education and training (VET).
- Investment in mentorship programs for young people in RRR areas - this could help to build aspirations and increase the likelihood of RRR students enrolling in further study including university.
- Strategic planning - consideration could be given to pairing universities to work with a particular region(s) to foster a sustained and systematic approach to improve the post-school opportunities for RRR students.