

Rural Access – Equity – Excellence in the Education Revolution

***Submission to the Higher Education Review
by 10 members of the Australia 2020 Summit.***

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Introduction:

Remote, rural and regional Australians experience many human rights concerns accessing quality education. Rural participation, retention and achievement on education are far below urban Australia. Yet education is the pathway to opportunity and productivity for disadvantaged people and communities. Remote, rural and regional communities experience significant difficulties attracting and retaining skilled and professional staff, in areas as diverse as education, health, mining, agricultural science, business etc. Action is required to break down the image of rural Australia, and value rural professional experience in recruitment and promotion.

This submission was developed by 10 members of the *Rural Industries and Rural Communities Stream* of the Australia 2020 Summit, held in April 2008. Rural access to education was discussed at length within the rural stream, and several strategies were developed to address the human rights concerns regarding education. Following the 2020 Summit, 10 members of the stream developed a collaborative proposal with key ideas to ensure 'Rural Access – Equity – Excellence in the Education Revolution'. The proposal collates the ideas presented at the summit, and requests that education is prioritised for rural revitalisation, sustainability and productivity. It ensures that all rural Australians can access their human right to education, and promotes rural social inclusion. This initiative embraces a long-term, 2020 vision.

This submission specifically refers to the key ideas related to higher education within that proposal.

Ambition:

By 2020, all rural Australians will have equitable access to quality education and training opportunities. These opportunities will encompass: community-based early childhood learning; primary and secondary education; vocational education and training; higher education; online learning; professional development; and lifelong learning.

Objectives:

- To increase the skills, knowledge, opportunities, capacity and productivity of rural Australians;
- To ensure parity of educational opportunities between rural and urban Australians from 'the cradle to the grave';
- To increase participation, retention and achievement of rural Australians in secondary and tertiary education; and
- To address the rural skills shortage and support rural population growth.

Key Strategies:

The Rural Education Revolution can involve the following strategies developed at the Summit:

- 1) A 'National Voice' for Rural Education;

- 2) National Rural Education Strategy;
- 3) Flexible and online learning opportunities;
- 4) Satellite Education Centres with high tech, high speed communications;
- 5) Non-means tested Youth Allowance and Tertiary Access Allowance for all rural tertiary students;
- 6) Commonwealth Scholarships for TAFE and other post-secondary students;
- 7) Mentoring a Rural Renaissance;
- 8) Funded rural work experience programs;
- 9) Waive HECS-HELP debts for rural practitioners;
- 10) Indigenous education strategies; and
- 11) Other issues for consideration.

1. A 'National Voice' for Rural Education: Remote, rural and regional Australia needs a funded 'National Voice' for rural education. This may involve funding and expanding the Rural Education Forum Australia. A funded peak body will ensure rural education is equitably represented in education policy development and decision-making. The peak body will include education providers, education recipients, and associated groups, building upon the current model of the Rural Education Forum Australia. The success of the National Rural Health Alliance is an example of this strategy in action.

Relevance to the Higher Education review: Previous Senate inquiries and government reviews of higher education have failed to adequately record and address the issues relating to rural participation in higher education. A peak body is required to provide a consistent voice to Government and the higher education sector, of the issues related to rural education. The Federal Government currently funds the National Rural Health Alliance, an active voice in policy development and implementation to address the health needs of rural Australians. The Federal Government has previously funded the Rural Education Forum Australia (REFA) which held a national forum and working party to develop REFA into a peak body for rural education, to be named the Australian Rural Education Alliance (AREA). However, in 2008, REFA's request to Hon. Julia Gillard, Minister for Education, for funding for AREA was rejected.

Recommendation 1: *That the Federal Government fund a peak body for rural education.*

2. National Rural Education Strategy: A national rural education strategy will provide a collaborative policy framework that embraces early childhood through to adult learning for all remote, rural and regional Australians. It will ensure that no rural Australian is left behind, including those from remote communities, remote properties and those with disabilities. The strategy will integrate research such as that recently completed by the National Centre of Science, Information and Communication Technology, and Mathematics Education for Rural and Regional Australia (SiMMER), and build upon the MCEETYA framework for rural and remote education.

Recommendation 2: *That the Federal Government, in partnership with the State and Territory governments, and in consultation with rural educators, consumers and researchers, develop a national rural education strategy from early learning to adult education.*

3. Flexible and online learning opportunities: Many rural students cannot access educational courses because they are not available (for example, many rural students are disadvantaged through lack of language courses). For

increased rural education opportunities, funding and support is required to develop and expand primary, secondary, TAFE and higher education online courses. This strategy will also encourage rural young people to remain in rural communities to complete their education.

Recommendation 3: *That Federal and State Governments provide funding and support to develop and expand primary, secondary, TAFE and higher education online courses, and make them accessible for students in rural communities.*

4. Satellite Education Centres with high tech, high speed communications: The current shortage of teachers impact highest on remote, rural and regional education. Sending students to cities and regional centres for quality education can disrupt families, deplete communities of whole generations and add unnecessary financial burden (however, it must be acknowledged that relocation is, and will continue to be, necessary for some students to reach their potential and aspirations). This strategy proposes 'state of the art' education centres as the hub of towns, with the highest quality teachers zoomed in online. Communities will be empowered and enabled to seize opportunities. In these centres, teaching would be interactive, innovative, exciting and of the highest quality, while also maintaining the presence of face-to-face teaching. These centres will also encourage those from a metropolitan background to relocate to rural and regional Australia for their studies. Rural Clinical Schools for medicine students in rural and remote communities are an example of successful satellite learning, and could be expanded to include other disciplines within the existing infrastructure. This strategy will also provide additional opportunities within Australia's educational export trade.

Recommendation 4: *That Federal and State Governments, in partnership with higher education providers, business and industry, fund and develop Satellite Education Centres in rural communities.*

5. Non-means tested Youth Allowance and Tertiary Access Allowance for all rural tertiary students: Many remote, rural and regional young people must relocate to an urban or regional centre for tertiary education, and encounter considerable costs (a recent study estimated expenses of \$15,000-\$20,000 per year, plus up to \$6000 for start-up costs). The current eligibility criteria for Youth Allowance marginalizes rural Australians, is a financial barrier to tertiary education for rural young people, and results in loss of services when whole families move to urban centres to access education. This strategy removes that financial barrier. All rural young people will be eligible for Youth Allowance if they need to leave home for tertiary education. Rural students will also be eligible for a non-means tested Tertiary Access Allowance for their start-up and relocation costs. Tertiary education will then be seen as a viable option for all rural young people, and families can remain in rural communities while their children study away from home.

Recommendation 5: *That the definition of 'Independence' for eligibility for Youth Allowance is amended to include young people who must leave home for higher education.*

Recommendation 6: *That all rural young people who leave home for higher education are eligible for a non-means tested Tertiary Access Allowance.*

6. Commonwealth Scholarships for TAFE and other post-secondary students: Currently, Commonwealth Scholarships are only provided for higher education students. However, rural young people who leave home for TAFE and other post-secondary courses encounter the same costs (TAFE students must also pay up-front fees). Extending Commonwealth Scholarships

for vocation post-secondary students will ensure they can equitably access financial support.

Recommendation 7: *That Commonwealth Scholarships are extended to include TAFE and other vocational post-secondary students.*

7. Mentoring a Rural Renaissance: A national mentoring program will bridge urban and rural Australia. Rural young people will be linked to rural and/or urban mentors to learn life skills such as entrepreneurship and community development, emotional intelligence and environmental stewardship. Rural tertiary students and trainees will have a rural and/or urban mentor to guide career pathways. Rural professionals and business-people will have urban mentors to share information and ideas, and for professional development (this program will include rural teachers). The strategy will also include a school buddy system that connects rural and urban schools, including opportunities for rural student exchange. The initiative will reconnect rural and urban Australia, promote rural communities, and empower rural young people to develop relationships with their peers outside their immediate community.

Recommendation 8: *That a national mentoring scheme is developed to support rural young people living in rural communities, rural young people studying away from home, and rural professionals.*

8. Funded rural work experience programs: This strategy was developed within the 'Strengthening Rural Skills' proposal at the 2020 Youth Summit. Rural student placements are expensive and therefore inaccessible for many students. This strategy will involve funded work experience and placements for secondary and tertiary students to have on-the-job training in rural communities. Both urban and rural students will be financially supported to access extensive rural placements, and will have the opportunity to understand their career in a rural context. This strategy also encourages tertiary education courses to include compulsory rural placements. This strategy aims to address the rural skills shortage through educating students about the career opportunities in rural communities.

Recommendation 9: *That the Federal and State Governments provide financial support for secondary and tertiary students to undertake student placements in rural communities.*

9. Waive HECS-HELP debts for rural practitioners: The strategy provides incentives for rural and urban young people to participate in tertiary education, and then to bring their skills to a regional, rural or remote community. Rural practitioners will be rewarded for working in the bush. A scaled model will consider level of remoteness with appropriate years of service, and rewards professionals who remain in rural communities for longer periods. This strategy will recruit and retain a rural population and a sustainable workforce. It will also ensure that rural Australians have equal access to education, health, social care and other services.

Recommendation 10: *That a scaled model is developed to waive HECS-HELP debts for practitioners who live and work in rural communities.*

10. Indigenous education: We refer to the Indigenous education ideas presented within the Indigenous stream at the 2020 summit, and propose recognition that since many Indigenous children live in rural areas, that their issues are similarly rural education issues and not necessarily isolated to Indigenous students only. These ideas include: developing a new education framework to give real choice for Indigenous children to get high quality education, including to attend boarding schools or hostels, enabled by a

combination of ABSTUDY, private school scholarships and government funding; encouraging high-performing young professionals to work as teachers alongside Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators; and other unreported ideas.

11. Other issues for consideration: Due to time constraints, some important rural education issues were not discussed at the 2020 Summit. These include: increased funding for regional universities; expanding Assistance for Isolated Children eligibility to facilitate choice in education for remote children; educating rural students with a disability, rural migrant and refugee peoples, and rural women.

Recommendation 11: *That research funding is increased for regional universities.*

Conclusion:

Improving rural access to quality education will improve rural socio-economic status, health and wellbeing, industries and economy, self esteem and the capacity of rural communities to thrive.