INQUIRY INTO FUTURE DEVELOPMENT OF THE NSW TERTIARY EDUCATION SECTOR

Organisation: Society for the Provision of Education in Rural Australia

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Brian O'Neill
Society for the Provision of Education in Rural Australia
PO Box 46
CALEN Qld
4798

Parliament of NSW Legislative Council
Portfolio Committee No.3 - Education
Inquiry into the future development of the NSW tertiary education sector

To the members of the committee,

I write to you as the President of The Society for the Provision of Education in Rural Australia (SPERA), to firstly commend you on the NSW Government's continued commitment to increasing opportunities for regional NSW and to thank you for providing us with the opportunity to provide feedback regarding the inquiry. Established in 1984, The Society for the Provision of Education in Rural Australia (SPERA) has members in all Australian states and territories as well as internationally. SPERA seeks to advance education opportunities in Rural Australia by:

1. Serving as a national advocate for rural education;
2. Promoting delivery systems that bring about efficient and effective learning; and
3. Collating and disseminating information on the provision of education in rural Australia.

The society holds an annual conference and produces the Australian and International Journal of Rural Education, which foregrounds current research into rural, remote and regional education. SPERA consists of people who share a common concern and commitment to the maintenance and development of appropriate educational opportunities for rural communities in Australia.

We have sought feedback and input on this submission from our Executive Committee and we hope that this feedback will enable the development of strategies for regional and rural engagement and strengthen the sustainability of the universities in NSW, whilst increasing opportunities for our most vulnerable students and communities. Our recommendations include:

1. **Outreach and Widening Participation activities to encourage university participation should be driven and facilitated by local communities in partnership with universities, rather than universities individually targeting specific schools or regions.**

2. **Student agency should be the focus of outreach activities in order for students to make informed choices regarding higher education.**

3. **Incentives for RRR higher education participation should be equally applied to students regardless of if they choose to remain within their communities or relocate for study.**
4. **RRR is not one equity group; more nuance is needed in how we understand the diverse identities of non-metropolitan communities.**

5. **Place an increased focus on state-wide university collaborations in regional NSW that are driven by regional communities.**

6. **Encourage collaboration between vocational and tertiary education providers to create diverse education pathways for RRR students.**

7. **Encourage collaborations between communities and universities that create opportunities for innovation and entrepreneurship**

8. **Face-to-Face support and local community-centred opportunities should be developed to bring together and support students studying online.**

9. **Continue to improve internet access in rural NSW.**

Geographic Mobility and the Diversity of Non-Metropolitan Communities

The role that universities play in non-metropolitan NSW is varied due to the diversity of communities that exist across the state. Each community has varying infrastructure, relationships, and engagement with universities. Some regional communities have full-scale universities embedded in their communities such as UNE in Armidale, while others have smaller satellite campuses of metropolitan universities such as UOW at Bega. Many smaller rural communities have Regional University Centres such as Cooma in the Snowy Mountains, while others have no access to a university.

This diversity in the level of university infrastructure in different regional communities is seldom recognised by governments, public policy and universities themselves. Instead, regional, rural and remote (RRR) communities have historically been considered as a homogenous equity group with similar needs and challenges (Zacharias & Brett, 2019).

For some students with no university option available locally, moving away from their community is the only legitimate option for university study. But students who are in larger regional centres are often misrecognised by the same homogenous discourse of what a RRR student is and as having the same need to move away to study irrespective of what is locally available. For communities with university providers, the lack of differentiation between RRR communities only fuels the mobility of young people to metropolitan centres, positioning the local university options in deficit to their metropolitan counterparts. For example, a student in Bathurst, which has a full-service university, may still feel the need to relocate to Sydney for university because that is seen as the 'successful' thing to do for a student from regional NSW.

Corbett (2008) and O'Shea et. al. (2019) found regional students believe that leaving their rural area is correlated with success. O'Shea et al. (2019) found that RRR communities supported and encouraged students to 'leave' at the end of schooling if they wanted to be 'successful', while those who 'stayed' are perceived as problematic or in deficit within the social mobility discourse. This tension is known as the 'mobility paradigm' and positions RRR communities in deficit to their urban counterparts and supports the exodus of young people from regional communities.

Universities wield significant power in influencing a student's decision on their post-secondary education location and perpetuating the mobility paradigm. A visit from a specific university can influence the geographical location that students aspire to study in. Although outreach and widening participation activities are signalled as non-university specific, these programs can surreptitiously act as marketing for a specific university, which also competes and devalues any local higher education study options that may be available. Many of the marketing and outreach activities perpetuate the mobility paradigm and undermine Federal and State Government policy efforts, such as Regional University Centres, to increase participation rates in their community and retain people in the regions.

Recommendations:

1. **Outreach and Widening Participation activities to encourage university participation should be driven and facilitated by local communities in partnership with universities, rather than universities individually targeting specific schools or regions.**
2. **Student agency should be the focus of outreach activities in order for students to make informed choices regarding higher education.**
3. **Incentives for RRR higher education participation should be equally applied to students regardless of if they choose to remain within their communities or relocate for study.**
4. **RRR is not one equity group; more nuance is needed in how we understand the diverse identities of non-metropolitan communities.**

Role of Universities in Regional Development

Universities have a pivotal role to play in the social and economic development of their regions. Benneworth and Fitja (2019) highlight the following contributions of universities:

1. Universities can contribute to labour market upskilling.
2. Universities can contribute to host regions' innovation networks by steering and supporting academics towards regional engagement.
3. Universities can raise the quality of regional innovation strategy processes and create collective innovation assets.

There are opportunities through the strategic coordination of universities with regional communities and industry partners to positively impact regional NSW. Community-University collaboration can create new opportunities for existing local industries as well as explore emerging industries for the future. However, the community must be at the center of any engagement activities in order to ensure there is a clear understanding of the local needs and provide locally developed solutions to these needs.

Universities and Vocational education providers also have scope to provide diverse pathways for RRR students, suited to their needs and communities. Examples of these include Indigenous vocational and tertiary pathways programs and vocational education certificates with embedded academic literacy and tertiary enabling content.

Universities can also be innovative and encourage entrepreneurism, particularly amongst students. The entrepreneurial nature of universities can offer models that support this activity in regional communities and challenge students and industry to reimagine their opportunities. For example, universities have established 'incubator labs' on campus to encourage 'start-ups' and could share these experiences more broadly with students in regional communities. One example is a Hackathon, which is an intensive activity to generate resources, such as digital platforms or apps. This creates opportunities for students to create their own opportunities and partner with local businesses and industry for the betterment of their community. However, as aforementioned, any strategic entrepreneurial partnerships should be led by regional communities, with universities filling a supportive role.

Recommendation:

5. **Place an increased focus on state-wide university collaborations in regional NSW that are driven by regional communities.**

6. **Encourage collaboration between vocational and tertiary education providers to create diverse education pathways for RRR students.**

7. **Encourage collaborations between communities and universities that create opportunities for innovation and entrepreneurship**

Provide scaffolded support for Online Learners

Students who study online are two and a half times more likely to withdraw from university without a qualification than those who study on campus (DET, 2018). Recent experiences with online learning across Australia have highlighted barriers to study well known to regional and remote students, including challenges with poor quality internet connections, social isolation and difficulties in accessing study support.

A recent study into regional university students who are studying online showed that those with very poor internet connections faced difficulties in accessing course materials, interruptions in completing online exams or assessment tasks and expressed anger, stress or frustration (Stone and Davis, 2020).

Social isolation has been identified as one of the largest barriers for students studying online (Muilenburg and Berge 2005). Only 21 percent of regional online students have opportunities for interactions with local students (QILT, 2016). Overcoming this isolation should not be completely reliant on technology. Rather, opportunities need to be developed within regional communities to connect students face to face, and to build socio-cultural bridges between regional and remote communities and universities.

Regional Universities Centres have been proven as an effective method of providing reliable and fast internet for regional, rural and remote students, as well as providing face-to-face support and opportunities for local student collaboration.

Access to study support in regional areas need to consider digital literacy and access to internet connections when providing online support for study, as well as ensuring access to support outside of business hours.

Recommendations:

8. **Face-to-Face support and local community-centred opportunities should be developed to bring together and support students studying online.**
9. **Continue to improve internet access in rural NSW.**

Finally, we strongly advocate for the NSW Government to include the voice of rural education practitioners in any reforms or strategies that emerge from this inquiry. Including the voice of rural education practitioners will be critical in ensuring the operationalisation of the package at an institutional level and meeting the needs of students and communities in regional NSW. SPERA is able to act as a conduit between the government and the sector and we would be positioned well to assist in facilitating this. Thank you for your time and if you have any questions, I'd be more than happy to discuss these with you.

Brian O'Neill

President of the Society for the Provision of Education in Rural Australia

References

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www.spera.asn.au   Society for the Provision of Education in Rural Australia Inc.

Postal address: PO Box 46, CALEN Qld, 4798