



2017 Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education

CEF Submission

The Country Education Foundation (CEF) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Commonwealth Government's Independent Review Into Regional, Rural and Remote Education (IRRRRE). Our work actively seeks to raise the aspirations of young people in regional, rural and remote Australia and increase their access to higher education, training and employment opportunities. We are therefore pleased to see this review, and are optimistic about its potential to generate the reforms and innovations needed to transform the lives of young people in the country.

Curriculum and assessment

Recommendation: Evaluations of curriculums and assessment regimes should consider how they measure and define success. The Country Education Foundation believes that curriculums should be expansive and reflect the many different paths which rural and regional students take after leaving school.

Allowing for some content to be tailored to local contexts and priorities, country schools should nonetheless prepare students for whatever career path they choose: whether that is remaining in their home community to work or seeking opportunities elsewhere. It is important the curriculum strikes a balance between the local needs of place and the skills and knowledge which leads to lifelong learning that opens doors to a wider world of ideas and experiences.

Insofar as the curriculum and assessment regime relates to building aspiration, there should be an inclusive articulation of the worth and purpose found in a wide range of career and personal goals. Success should be defined generously and seen as attainable by all, not something welded to any single trajectory. Such an emphasis would counter the perception that ‘learning is for leaving’ and encourage young people to view education as a means to fulfil their potential in any number of ways.

It is important to ask whether the curriculum and assessment regimes factor in, or encourage, multiple streams of individual choices and interests? Can they be customised to local priorities to make them more relevant? Do they prompt thinking about lifelong learning, and the reality that many students will take different paths, have multiple-careers and need to be versatile in an age of great technological disruption?

Recommendation: More connections and pathways between high school and regional university programmes should be developed.

Moving beyond existing routes from high school and university such as the ATAR system, there is an opportunity to create a richer social fabric in regional communities by encouraging students to take alternate paths to higher education opportunities. By identifying students in years 11 and 12 and supporting them on a journey to completing university programmes there can be a more strategic approach to the goal of giving individuals new opportunities and strengthening regional communities.

Teachers and teaching

Recommendation: Teachers in regional, rural and remote areas should have more professional development opportunities, and access to resources that assist them in becoming familiar with current higher education, training and employment options and available support which their students could be encouraged to apply for after leaving school.

The Country Education Foundation recognises the importance of teachers and schools for raising the aspirations of young people in regional and rural Australia. We also acknowledge their vital role in communicating information about future study and career options. Many of the alumni we have surveyed tell us they first learnt about our scholarships, grants and resources from teachers at school, including past and present class teachers and year group advisers. As our alumni testify, teachers provided not only information but the necessary encouragement and boost of confidence they needed to apply.

In our experience, students are more likely to make an application when school communities work to encourage, support and inform students as they think about life beyond school. The numbers of applications we receive directly corresponds with the level of enthusiasm we encounter in schools. To ensure we tap into this enthusiasm we encourage local foundation committees to include principals, careers advisors, teachers and parents as members.

The challenge is to ensure that all teachers, regardless of whether they have specific careers advisor responsibilities or not, overcome the 'remoteness gap' and access the resources and training they need to provide relevant and current information to their students (McConnell, *'Tipping Points' to Higher Education for NSW Rural and Remote Students*, 2015).

Additional funding may need to be found for the professional development of country teachers. Training should include proven strategies for encouraging students to plan their initial future study and career options. At the least, teachers should be made aware of the best places to go for up-to-date resources and information for them and their students. Noting the cost of travelling considerable distances to attend information briefings and consultations with universities and other education providers, funding should be available to facilitate the attendance of regional and rural teachers and careers advisors.

Leaders and leadership

Recommendation: Programmes which support senior school leaders to engage with parents and the community to forge a closer nexus

between the goals of schools and communities should be encouraged and supported.

The Country Education Foundation affirms the importance of good leadership in rural and regional schools. In our work, we have had the pleasure of encountering many engaged and invested principals and other school leaders. Their enthusiasm for, and dedication to, realising the potential of their students is evident. School leaders play an important role in the community working to build relationships. Cooperative goals can only be formed when there is an open dialogue about the importance of education and how schools and communities can best support their young people to transition to education, training and study options after school.

CEF recognises that senior school leaders need good access to support structures and professional development opportunities and peer networks. The benefits of having good school leaders are many, but we view it as being especially important in terms of providing good role models and examples of leadership to the student population, which can hopefully be translated into the next generation of school and community leaders. The mentoring role which senior school leaders have cannot be understated.

School and community

Recommendation: There is a need for a comprehensive online resource tailored for country students, schools and the community which communicates information about post-school options and has a database of ‘success stories’.

CEF believes good role models and the right information presented in an accessible way can best illuminate the many different pathways that lead to success. As Corbett (2016) identifies, the benefits of higher education as a ‘pipeline’ to occupational security is not always established in rural communities. Part of the problem is that young people do not always have access to relevant information and visible role models. What does exist is fragmented and dispersed, or for practical reasons is not regularly updated or maintained.

If sustainable funding and a coordinating partner could be identified, a proactive solution would be to establish and maintain a one-stop online careers resource for country youth which incorporates information on the full range of post-school study and employment options and support. Additionally, it should integrate a database of success stories of people from country Australia (everyone from Baz Luhrmann and Annabel Crabb through to a local successful businessperson or doctor).

Recommendation: More coordination and collaboration is needed between philanthropic and educational organisations working to improve post-school transition outcomes of country youth.

Recommendation: An audit of existing programmes and providers is needed to identify overlaps and gaps, following this a summit or conference of relevant stakeholders could lay the groundwork for more efficient and strategic resource, knowledge and skill sharing.

There are many programmes and organisations working to improve access to higher education and vocational opportunities for country youth. The individual success of these programmes, however, does not hide the fact that there are many organisational inefficiencies. Over the past couple of years, CEF has benefited from developing shared infrastructure such as online applications for our 43 local foundations (cef.org.au/our-foundations-overview). This has replaced separate paper application processes while keeping the community-level evaluation of applications. Through coordination and cooperation, we have streamlined our processes, reduced burdens on volunteers and made it easier for them to spend their time working on what matters most.

ICT

Recommendation: Students in rural, regional and remote Australia should have access to quality digital literacy programmes which give them necessary skills to contribute to the digital economy.

The Country Education Foundation supports the implementation and ongoing support of digital literacy programmes. It is vital that young people in regional, rural and remote Australia can have access to the skills and knowledge that will enable them to participate fully in the new digital economy, pursue careers and lead entrepreneurial activity in, and make the most of technological innovation. Such skills are becoming essential across a number of sectors from agriculture to healthcare, and

are likely to become more critical in time. Lack of digital literacy can further isolate those living in already remote parts of the country. Further, the opportunities that technology offers to support decentralised business and employment should be recognised as one of the ways that will encourage young people to stay in country communities if they choose.

Recommendation: It is essential that digital literacy programmes are twinned with a commitment to the provision of reliable ICT infrastructure in rural, regional and remote schools and households.

Digital literacy learning can only be backed up if there is sufficient access to the infrastructure and services that allows that education to be applied. The first consideration of any commitment to improving digital literacy in the country must be a commitment by governments to facilitating quality, consistent and cutting-edge ICT infrastructure such as improved internet speed, clear reception of digital channels, and access to cutting-edge technology and platforms. Realising such a commitment in addition to the delivery of high-quality digital literacy programmes will be setting up country students in the country to succeed, and contribute more fully to the digital economy.

Entrepreneurship and schools

Recommendation: a more strategic approach should be taken to giving young people the skills, knowledge and opportunities to become leaders and innovators in growth sectors and industries that have special relevance to regional, rural and remote economies.

As traditional industries and sources of employment in country areas are disrupted, it is vital that young people are not left behind. Funding should be allocated to investigate and develop integrated pathways which encourage young people into emerging sectors of growth that are going to be critical to the future economy. Such integrated pathways could be developed in areas including: agriculture (with a focus on agritech and business), healthcare and disability support, education, e-commerce and technological innovation.

Recommendation: Integrated pathways from schools to higher education and training opportunities, and then into careers in areas of growth may be one way in which country students can be set up to succeed.

Taking agriculture as an example: the planned interconnected relationship and co-location of Hurlstone Agricultural High School on the Hawkesbury campus of Western Sydney University could be a transferable model. With a focus on agriculture and STEM subjects combined with close collaboration with the university and sharing facilities and resources, the school will be able to equip students with not only a specialised knowledge of agriculture and general skills in cognate disciplines, but it will expose its students to the career opportunities in the field of agricultural technology and innovation. As Mal Peters commented in a 2009 review of Hurlstone, the need for such institutions was evident in their capacity to increase student engagement and participation in an important industry at a moment where demand is expected to increase but the number of people entering the sector is below requirements.

Similar approaches may be useful in other regional centres and in other industries and sectors. It makes sense that integrated pathways between schools and higher education and training providers, including TAFE, be considered as part of wider efforts to encourage young people in rural, regional and remote areas into study, training and careers in areas of future importance to Australia.

Transitioning beyond school

Recommendation: A balance needs to be struck between government support and community-led initiatives which encourage country youth transition to new education, training and employment opportunities.

We believe the best support a young person can have is from their community. While financial help is part of this, the encouragement and investment of confidence have an equal, if not greater, value. Grants should be available for grassroots programmes which enable communities to support their young people. This will limit some of the inefficiencies of large organisations and channel funding to those in the community who can best benefit from it.

Recommendation: Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) funding aimed at improving access, participation and success of rural and remote students is important and must be maintained, if not increased.

CEF's experience echoes the positive findings in the HEPPP Evaluation Report which establish the program's good social returns on investment. Many of our education partnerships with universities are supported by HEPPP funding. For example, our Scholarships Guide project was made possible with the support of education partners such as Macquarie University who receive HEPPP funding.

Recommendation: Mentoring programmes and peer-support networks at universities for country youth studying away from home should be encouraged and have access to seed or grant funding.

Mentoring programmes have long been used as a proven means of facilitating relationships which can support, encourage and inspire individuals. Many of our local foundations run mentoring programs to great effect. Country students often do not have the same support networks as their peers, caused by relocation. The establishment of more formalised mentoring structures would enable the efficient matching of students with people willing to help them.

Recommendation: Policy settings which make relocation more affordable for country students and their families should be actively pursued. For example, residential facilities could guarantee places for students living more than 100 kilometres from campus. Consistent public transport concessions for students travelling interstate should be introduced. The higher rate of Youth Allowance that applies to young people who have to live away from home should be regularly reviewed to ensure it reflects actual relocation costs.

Final Comments

The Country Education Foundation (CEF) believe's where you grew up, or went to school, should never be a barrier to unlocking your full potential. We are pleased to see this review and are optimistic about the potential to generate the reforms and innovations needed to transform lives. As our Patron, former Deputy Prime Minister Tim Fischer, says: 'Good education provides not only individuals with keys for a positive future, individual meshing cogs to create real progress, but also the seeds on which the fabric of the nation can build and progress'.

It is important that governments, education institutions and the non-for profit sector work together to realise the shared goal of closing the participation gap and lifting the outcomes and achievements of young people in the country.

We believe that government, education and community stakeholders will be most effective if they focus on working collectively to:

- a) invest in and deliver a community-led grassroots framework that adds value to and is connected with existing HEPPP and philanthropic programmes.
- b) implement improved ways to make resources available to students and communities about post-school options and support.
- c) facilitate aspiration building and peer-support through the funding and coordination of mentoring programmes.
- d) create linkages between schools, communities and institutions which create opportunities for young people in country Australia.
- e) overcome the practical barriers to participation and access such as costs.

For our part, CEF will do everything we can to help achieve these goals to the extent our resources and cooperative relationships allow. We are always looking for more ways that we can help achieve our mission to help country communities support their local school-leavers – and in doing so, to invest in the future of Australia.

CEF is a national not-for-profit organisation which establishes and supports local education foundations across Australia – enabling them to raise funds for local youth to help them with their transition from high school into further education, training or jobs. Starting with a single foundation in 1993, the CEF family has grown into a network of more than 40 local education foundations run by more than 400 volunteers that have distributed more than \$8.2 million in support. We also partner with universities and corporate and philanthropic organisations across the country to leverage and increase our reach. We receive no direct government funding. What we raise directly helps rural and regional youth access education, training and jobs through grants, scholarships, support services and resources.

The CEF approach to locally-based fundraising, grants and support is a proven success. Independent research shows that for every dollar invested in our work a return of \$3.10 is created in social value – changing the lives of young Australians, their families and their communities. Over 90 per cent of our grant recipients go on to complete the course or training for which they are funded. By investing in these young people we are investing in their future and in the future of rural and regional Australia.