Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education

Response to Discussion Paper

Submission by the Regional Australia Institute

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FOR THE GOOD OF AUSTRALIA

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1. Introduction

Accompanying the announcement of the Independent Review into Regional, Rural, and Remote Education (IRRRRE) earlier this year was the promise to look at the "complete puzzle" of regional education. If the Australian Government is serious about addressing the entrenched systemic educational divide between regional areas and our biggest cities, it will need to keep this promise. The initial Discussion Paper for the review highlights a number of challenges and structural barriers impeding regional Australians from reaching their full potential and the Regional Australia Institute (RAI) welcomes any effort to put these issues up in lights. However, if the Discussion Paper is indicative of the puzzle the Independent Review aims to solve, it's missing a significant piece.

In particular, the Discussion Paper fails to address the need for a renewed focus on post school education, the transition from school to work, and lifelong learning. Instead, it focuses almost exclusively on issues surrounding *schooling* and the transition from high-school to further education. This is a serious shortcoming.

The RAI recommends the Independent Review increase its focus on issues beyond school performance and student outcomes and avoid the risk of conducting what is substantively a regional and rural schools review.

Evidence continues to mount that shows the concept of a one-time education completed early on in life is fast becoming obsolete. A student today is more likely to experience a "portfolio career", with potentially up to 17 different jobs over 5 careers[i].

For people already in the workforce, the need to change jobs as automation disrupts the workforce[ii] or to continue finding ways to working into their 60's and 70's as life expectancy increases[iii] will make continual engagement in education essential for regional Australians.

The RAI's work has documented that these national issues are especially crucial for the future of regional communities. At the moment, it is not clear that our education system for adults in regions is well prepared to deal with these changes, particularly given the severe disruption to vocational education systems by recent reforms and the on-going focus on qualifications rather than a lifetime of skills (see Box 1).

Looking at the complete puzzle means examining access to learning opportunities and the quality of engagement in learning across the entire regional community.

In particular, closer attention needs to be paid to the transition to work. Without suitable career pathways in regions, the worry in many communities is that students in the education system are merely 'learning to leave' – as they will be forced to move away to get the start in the labour market that they are looking for.

The RAI also notes the evidence that demonstrates that social factors, such as parent educational attainment, have been found to be more significant than economic factors in explaining children's educational outcomes for the lower SES cohorts that are often found in rural areas [iv] . Rather than giving up on educational attainment for people who are already out of school and remaining in regions, we see the focus on adult engagement

> **Box 1. Withdrawal of training providers**
>
> Changes made to the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment (the key 'train the trainer' VET course) now mandate groups of a minimum of 8 and at least 1 face to face session per week. As a result none of the 9 RTOs previously offering this course in Western NSW have applied to offer it in 2017.

as one which can help to build stronger educational aspiration across communities including for our current and next generations of students and contribute to school outcomes as well as those for better engaged adults.

As it stands now the numbers aren't pretty for regional learning outcomes. On average, regional areas are 20 percentage points below metropolitan areas in terms of residents who have completed high school, as well as 9 percentage points below in terms of people with university level qualifications. Regions also fall below metropolitan areas in terms of young adults between the ages of 15-24 not engaged in some form of education, training and employment and adults enrolled in some form of adult education[v].

There's been little change in the relative position of regions in 10 years despite a series of funding and reforms to the national education system. Australia's performance in the OECD's Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) demonstrates that on average regional students trail their metro counterparts by a year of schooling, and have done since PISA began in 2000[vi].

Yet despite its significance, policy reform is yet to bridge this divide. Ad hoc and sector focused policies in the past have aimed to address specific issues in the regional education system. Yet these on their own won't address what is a systemic challenge.

To shift the needle, there needs to be a move away from the rhetoric of rural deprivation, in which regional, rural, and remote students need to "catch up" to city kids – and that communications technology will be a silver bullet for fixing this.

The RAI recommends that the Independent Review set an aspirational target of every regional Australian being involved in some form of education during any five year period and support this with a strategy to lift educational engagement, aspiration and attainment in regions.

2. Significance of Lifelong Learning

Lifelong learning is critical to the future of Regional, Rural and Remote Education. The world of digital work means that continuous learning – whether it be on the job training, a mix of formal or informal, or even self-taught – will increasingly become a crucial tool in keeping skills up to date. The pace at which jobs are changing means that it's not just school age students that need attention.

Research by the Foundation for Young Australians (FYA) highlights that "currently 70% of young Australians are getting their first jobs in roles that will either look very different or be completely lost in the next 10 to 15 years due to automation"[vii]. The jobs most likely to fade will be low skilled, labour intensive jobs, but technological change will mean that many medium and even some high skill jobs and tasks will be systemised and automated[viii]. Moreover, one in four adults surveyed across OECD countries reported a "mismatch between their current skills and the qualifications required for their jobs"[ix]. In Australia specifically, research shows that satisfaction among employers that the VET system was delivering the skill their workers needed is decreasing[x], and that there is a need for further flexibility in the delivery of training[xi].

Lifelong learning is one of the best insurance policies against this changing world of work. When new skills emerge just as fast as others become dated, "employability is less about what you already know and more about your capacity to learn"[xii]. This is especially true when recognising that the combination of change affecting work and wider society carries a real risk of exacerbating gaps and inequalities already in place[xiii].

Research has demonstrated that learning is good for health outcomes, greater civic engagement, earning capacity, and your family's future. The Discussion Paper emphasised that "student's aspirations are shaped by attitudes and beliefs about the value, attainability and relevance" of further education[xiv]. More specifically, the paper cited previous research indicating the clear disparity in educational aspirations between regional students and their metropolitan peers, with parental influence identified as one of the two strongest predictors of occupational aspirations[xv]. Encouraging ongoing learning, in particular adult learning, needs to be a priority in addressing this identified gap.

As such, the World Economic Forum (WEF) has emphasised the need for countries to implement a new deal for lifelong learning that provides dynamic and inclusive learning systems. This means inspiring learners of all ages and backgrounds, to keep building skills and driving motivation among communities and regions[xvi]. The positive benefits of lifelong learning are obvious, yet proportionately there has been little energy invested into learning beyond initial education, leaving the size and reach of provision to market forces[xvii].

The WEF has noted that part of the difficulty in prioritising investment for lifelong learning is due to the insufficient data related to adults pursuing education. Unlike schools and universities, where data is easily captured through administrative mechanisms, it's far more challenging to assess rates of adults engaged in further education.

Two public sector examples of places incorporating lifelong learning initiatives include the Institute for Adult Learning in Singapore (IAL)[xviii] and the Unionlearn Mid-Life Career Review[xix].

- The IAL has developed a platform for encouraging workplace learning at and through work, while also playing a key role in developing adult educators to deliver learning experiences of their own.

The Unionlearn Mid-Life Career program aimed to train union learning representatives to support older colleagues in their workplace, and carry out mid-life development reviews to help older workers identify their transferable skills. The project finalised in 2014 with more than 2500 individuals participating.

The RAI recommends that the Independent Review request that the Australian Government put in place an updated approach to gathering and analysing data on participation in lifelong learning activities in rural and regional areas and their impact on employment and educational outcomes as a foundation for the assessment of achievement against the goal recommended above.

3. Future of Work and Setting Kids Up for Success

As well as ongoing learning, younger Australians need to be equipped with skills that will allow them to succeed in the future of work. Research finds that young people simply aren't being adequately prepared, and that traditional education and training institutions will be required to transform their approaches[xx]. Importantly, it is not a question of how we develop skills to race ahead *against* technology, but instead what mix of skills provides the greatest opportunity to race ahead *with* technology[xxi].

While there is an endless number of predictions around the scale of job losses, what the majority of studies agree upon is that the future job market will have a decrease in the number of lower skilled occupations, and an increase in the comparatively higher skilled occupations[xxii]. Previous work commissioned by the FYA expects that within 2-5 years, at least 90% of the workforce will need basic digital literacy and that 1 in 2 Australians will need higher order tech skills like programming and software development[xxiii].

In addition to technical skills, soft skills like creativity, collaboration, and communication as well as entrepreneurialism will also be key. While these kinds of social skills are identified as vital for 21st century skill frameworks, they tend to not to be key focuses of classrooms[xxiv].

Therefore, the emphasis in the Discussion Paper on incorporating entrepreneurship in regional schools is fully supported by the RAI. In particular, the awareness that an entrepreneurial education requires a much broader engagement between schools, local businesses, and the community.

A study by the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation[xxv] found that around 5% of students in regional schools were already engaged in entrepreneurial activities. It also found that these students, and their less entrepreneurial peers, were *not* looking to the school system to give them the business skills they needed. So partnerships between schools and the local business community are essential for bringing the credibility in learning entrepreneurship that is required.

Across Australia, there is a range of examples in which schools and communities are engaging with technology and entrepreneurial approaches to education.

- Bitlink workshops in Launceston, Tasmania – aimed at kids aged 9-14 workshops provide kids with a chance to explore and learn with technology. They not only focus on basic programming but other skills like collaboration, and design.[xxvi]
- Mildura Innovation Awards – provide a chance for Mildura to promote innovative thinking and entrepreneurship to local students. Run over an eight month period, events and programs are held to stimulate an innovative culture.[xxvii]
- UNE Smart Farm initiative – a showcase site for emerging technologies in the agriculture industry offering students a chance to get acquainted with new technologies applied in the field. The facility provides students in the region a glimpse into the kinds of occupations that might emerge in the industry within five to ten years.[xxviii]
- Charters Towers School of Distance Education – the school uses internet connections to create classroom experiences remotely, in which teachers can read what the teachers put up on the board and break out into groups with fellow students. Students must also complete a Certificate I in Information, Digital Media and Technology.[xxix]
- Tutor in the Cloud – an online tutoring company providing students with access to high quality tutors no matter where they live. A key focus of the business is being able to provide

a product with low bandwidth options to ensure all regional students can make use of their services.[xxx]

The RAI recommends that Independent Review provide a strategy for the incorporation of entrepreneurial education, social and technology skills into all rural and regional schools as part of a wider strategy to set kids up for success in a changing work environment.

4. Conclusion

While the Discussion Paper is a productive start to the Independent Review, it falls short of expectations in its narrow focus on schools. The range of issues laid out are far from independent of one another, and in most cases, compound the systemic challenges faced by regional, remote and rural students. These issues won't be solved simply by additional funding in priority areas, and technology alone with not be a panacea for entrenched disadvantage.

Given that little or no progress has been achieved in the last decade, there must be a radical transformation of how education is delivered in non-metropolitan areas.

Regions are starting from further back in education terms and they are also more exposed to technological change. Without a dramatic change to how we lift regional education outcomes it is unlikely that we will bridge this divide.

Australia's two-speed education system compounds existing health, opportunity and income gaps in regional areas. This Independent Review has to take a chance to craft a new way forward and the RAI looks forward to further supporting the review in its work.

i https://www.fya.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/FYA_TheNewWorkSmarts_July2017.pdf

ii http://www.regionalaustralia.org.au/home/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/The-Future-of-Work_report.pdf

iii http://www.regionalaustralia.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Talking-Point-Super-Boomers-FINAL.pdf

iv https://www.sprc.unsw.edu.au/media/SPRCFile/NSPC01_7_Considine_Zappala.pdf

v http://www.regionalaustralia.org.au/home/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Human-Capital-Index_Report_final-1.pdf

vi https://www.acer.org/documents/PISA-2012-Report.pdf

vii https://www.fya.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/FYA_TheNewWorkSmarts_July2017.pdf

viii http://www.regionalaustralia.org.au/home/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/The-Future-of-Work_report.pdf

ix https://www.oecd.org/eco/growth/Skill-mismatch-and-public-policy-in-OECD-countries.pdf

x https://www.ncver.edu.au/__data/assets/file/0021/7743/review-of-the-seuv-2663.pdf

xi https://www.ncver.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0033/792276/Employers-perspectives-on-training-three-industries.pdf

xii https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/09/ceo-career-tips-for-millennials/

xiii https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2017/07/lifelong-learning-helps-governments-business/

xiv Discussion Paper page 46

xv http://research.acer.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1044&context=lsay_research

xvi http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_EGW_White_Paper_Reskilling.pdf

xvii https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2017/07/lifelong-learning-helps-governments-business/

xviii https://www.ial.edu.sg/

xix https://www.unionlearn.org.uk/supporting-midlife-development

xx https://www.fya.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/FYA_TheNewWorkSmarts_July2017.pdf

xxi http://ebusiness.mit.edu/research/Briefs/Brynjolfsson_McAfee_Race_Against_the_Machine.pdf

xxii PricewaterhouseCoopers (2015), A Smart Move. Available online at www.pwc.com/gx/en/industries/government-public-services/public-sector-research-centre/australia/ smart-move.html and Department of Employment (2015), Australian Jobs 2016. Available online at https://docs.employment.gov.au/documents/australian-jobs-2015-publication

xxiii Foundation for Young Australians (2015), New Work Order. Available online at www.fya.org.au/2015/08/23/the-new-work-order-report/

xxiv World Economic Forum 2016, New Vision for Education: Fostering Social and Emotional Learning Through Technology. Available online at www.weforum.org/reports/new-vision-for-education-fostering-social-andemotional-learning-through-technology

xxv Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation (2005) *Business Operators Still at School: the missing piece of the school-to-work transition puzzle*, Canberra

xxvi http://www.bitlink.com.au/

xxvii http://www.mildurainnovation.com.au/

xxviii https://www.une.edu.au/research/research-centres-institutes/smart-farm

xxix https://chartowesde.eq.edu.au/Pages/default.aspx

xxx https://www.youreducation.com.au/