



14 February 2020

Mr Andrew Laming MP
Chair
House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Emailed to ee.reps@aph.gov.au

Dear Mr Laming,

Education in remote and complex environments

The Association of Heads of Independent Schools of Australia (AHISA) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Committee's review of education in remote and complex environments.

In recent years AHISA has collected a substantial body of evidence from its members relating to education provision in regional and remote areas, and provision for students from regional and remote areas attending metropolitan or inner regional schools. Data from surveys of members and other reports of practice in members' schools have informed AHISA's submissions to the Inquiry into Educational Opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Students¹, the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education², the Expert Review of Australia's Vocational Education and Training System³, the National Regional, Rural and Remote Education Strategy consultation⁴ and, most recently, the Productivity Commission's inquiry into mental health.⁵

In this submission we have collated evidence which is relevant to the inquiry's terms of reference, and provide a brief summary of key findings and recommendations.

We would welcome any inquiries you may have about this submission. These may be addressed to AHISA's Chief Executive Officer, Ms Beth Blackwood, telephone (02) 6247 7300, email ceo@ahisa.edu.au.

Yours faithfully,

The Rev Chris Ivey

AHISA National Chair
Principal of St Andrew's Anglican College, Queensland



ABOUT AHISA

AHISA Ltd is a professional association for Heads of independent schools.

The primary object of AHISA is to optimise the opportunity for the education and welfare of Australia's young people through the maintenance of collegiality and high standards of professional practice and conduct amongst its members.

AHISA's 440 members lead schools that collectively account for over 443,000 students, representing over 11 per cent of total Australian school enrolments and 20 per cent of Australia's total Year 12 enrolments. One in every five Australian Year 12 students gains part of their education at an AHISA member's school.

AHISA's members lead a collective workforce of over 40,000 teaching staff and some 27,000 support staff.

The socio-economic profile of AHISA members' schools is diverse. Over 20 per cent of our members lead schools serving low- to very low-SES communities.

Almost a third of AHISA's members lead schools with boarding provision.

AHISA believes that a high quality schooling system in Australia depends on:

- Parents having the freedom to exercise their rights and responsibilities in regard to the education of their children
- Students and their families having the freedom to choose among diverse schooling options
- Schools having the autonomy to exercise educational leadership as they respond to the emerging needs of their communities in a rapidly changing society.

A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

In his media release announcing the launch of the Standing Committee's inquiry into the education of students in remote and complex environments, Committee Chair Mr Andrew Laming MP noted that 'the inquiry will examine the performance of the Australian education system in remote and regional areas, its territories and in complex circumstances like drought and post-natural disaster'.

In submitting to the inquiry, AHISA draws on surveys of its members, in which school location is identified by state/territory and according to the Australian Standard Geographic Classification (ASGC) system, which defines location as 'Major City', 'Inner Regional', 'Outer Regional', 'Remote', and 'Very Remote'. This system has been adopted by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) and is used to define the location of schools on My School profiles and in the reporting of NAPLAN results by geolocation.

While the ASGC classifications are referenced in analysis and presentation of AHISA survey data, AHISA also adopts from time to time the terms 'regional and remote' or 'regional, rural and remote' when broader references are made to location.

In referring to vocational education and training (VET), we have also attempted to align with terminology recommended by the *Preparing secondary students for work* framework⁶ (2014), published by Education Services Australia on behalf of the Education Council. The framework encourages adoption of the terms 'vocational learning' and 'vocational education and training' or 'VET' to distinguish between learning such as career education, offered as part of the general school curriculum, and the provision by schools of nationally accredited training (including part-time apprenticeships and traineeships) under which qualifications are issued by Registered Training Organisations (RTOs).

AHISA is aware that terminology and the understandings that inform it are important in discussing issues relating to location. For example, there is a view expressed in research literature that terms such as 'regional' and 'remote' risk 'constructing non-urban locations as inherently deficient and marginal'.⁷ There is also a view, as expressed in the *Red Dirt Education* report⁸, that the term 'disadvantage' in relation to remoteness is 'a Western construct that has been developed to give a sense of privilege to the values, knowledges and ways of being that are not rooted in the context of remote Australia'.

AHISA members who lead schools in 'Remote' or 'Very Remote' locations are alive to the need to make explicit the assumptions that can inform definitions of terms and their use. For example, one respondent to AHISA's 2017 member surveys commented that a lack of aspiration for tertiary education or lack of attendance at school due to family/cultural obligations could not be assumed as having a negative impact on the educational experience of students from Very Remote areas and that time taken by students to meet family and cultural obligations, for instance, should be viewed and supported as valuable and positive.

In this submission, following a recommendation by Professor Elizabeth McKinley⁹, we use the term 'opportunity gap' over the term 'achievement gap', to allow for recognition of the capacities and strengths of people and institutions that can be drawn on to bridge opportunity gaps. Similarly, any use of the term disadvantage in this submission should be understood in the context of indicating an opportunity gap. AHISA recognises, however, that identifying achievement gaps can be a useful and important means of identifying opportunity gaps.

KEY FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Section 1: Challenges to schooling provision in regional and remote areas

- Social and economic challenges can have an increasing impact on schools' provision for students as remoteness increases.
- For many Heads of independent schools, opportunity gaps for students in regional and remote areas that could most usefully be bridged by governments are perceived to be outside the education system – most typically in the health system or in provision of internet and broadband services.
- Internet connection and bandwidth are identified as key to enhancing educational provision in regional and remote areas, to expand educational offerings, meet individual student learning needs and access professional development for staff.
- Where they have power and opportunity to effect change, schools are implementing a range of strategies to meet the specific needs of students and the school community.
- Policies or government-funded programs that are targeted at school education must take into account that schools are unique communities which, while they may share common challenges, will need to address these challenges in ways that are best suited to the school community if interventions are to be effective.

Section 2: VET provision in regional and remote schools

- Responses to AHISA's 2019 member survey on VET provision indicate that further research may be useful to assess the potential of regional and remote schools in all sectors to promote or offer Certificate III level VET and what support might be needed by schools if they are to achieve this.
- To encourage schools in regional and remote areas to pursue RTO status, the compliance burden could be eased by creating a special category of registration for RTO status for schools as existing education providers already meeting significant accountability, reporting and audit obligations. Similarly, to encourage teachers to also take on VET instruction, recognition of prior qualifications in teaching should be given for attainment of the required Certificate IV in Training and Assessment and, in recognition of the significant professional learning teachers must undertake to maintain registration, the Certificate IV qualification should be recognised for at least five years.
- Many families cannot afford school fees plus VET course fees. Subsidising fully, or in part, students' enrolment in externally provided VET courses could encourage greater take up of VET by students, contributing to skills acquisition and exploration of career options.

Section 3: Quality teaching in regional and remote schools

- Schools in regional and remote areas adopt a number of strategies to support a high quality teaching workforce in their schools, including recruiting staff from overseas.
- To avoid restricting the capacity of schools in regional and remote areas to fill staff skills gaps, the Australian Government should adopt a more nuanced approach to determining

skills shortages for the purposes of visa eligibility under Temporary Skill Shortage program arrangement.

- Partnerships between regional and remote schools and universities could be a viable option for the provision of higher education and professional development opportunities for teachers – contributing to quality schooling provision in regional and remote locations and supporting recruitment and retention of teachers.
- Online course delivery is seen by Heads of independent schools in rural and remote locations as an important means of overcoming time and cost challenges in delivering professional development for teachers.

Section 4: School and community connections

- Schools in regional and remote areas play an important role in contributing to the social and cultural wellbeing of their wider communities.

Section 5: Away from home educational provision for students from regional and remote areas

- Students from regional and remote areas living away from home to attend school face significant challenges. Schools adopt a range of strategies to help overcome these challenges.
- AHISA members who lead boarding schools in ‘Major City’ locations or lead regional and remote schools that make provision for students who must live away from home to attend, through boarding, hostel or home stay arrangements, have identified a range of ways in which governments can support students from rural and remote locations educated out of area. These are listed on page 20 of this submission.

Section 6: Focus on educational provision for Indigenous students from regional and remote areas

- The Australian Government should sustain and even expand its support for residential scholarship programs for Indigenous students from regional and remote areas. Not only is this support of direct benefit for students, it also encourages contributions from private individuals, school communities and philanthropic organisations.
- Between-school collaborations and school-community partnerships are a viable option for increasing educational opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and professional learning opportunities for teachers in regional and remote schools. Importantly, such collaborations are reciprocal, benefitting both partners.
- The success of between-school collaborations and innovative, on-country models of educational provision established by ‘Major City’ schools is dependent on long-term, trusting relationships between schools and Indigenous communities.

Section 7: The interaction of education provision and health services in regional and remote areas

- Education provision in regional and remote locations cannot be separated from economic, social, health and housing issues experienced by students.



- Improving health services in regional and remote areas will help improve educational outcomes for students.
- If the Australian Government decides to appoint a commissioner to oversee the implementation of a national regional and remote education strategy, an important role of the commissioner should be to liaise with the National Rural Health Commissioner.

1. CHALLENGES TO SCHOOLING PROVISION IN REGIONAL AND REMOTE AREAS

1a Factors having a negative impact on schooling provision

Responses to AHISA's 2017 survey of members who lead schools in regional and remote areas indicate that some of the greatest challenges to provision – such as depressed local economic conditions – are external to schools and beyond the capacity of schools to address themselves. As the table below demonstrates, external challenges can have an increasing impact on schools' provision for students as remoteness increases.

1.1 Top mentioned factors having a negative impact on schools' educational provision

INNER REGIONAL	OUTER REGIONAL	REMOTE	VERY REMOTE
Difficulties in teacher recruitment	Difficulties in teacher recruitment	Difficulties in teacher recruitment	Difficulties in teacher recruitment
Depressed local economic conditions	Depressed local economic conditions	Depressed local economic conditions	Costs or levels of resourcing (that may have an impact on subject offerings, access to subjects via distance education or other providers)
Costs or levels of resourcing (that may have an impact on subject offerings, access to subjects via distance education or other providers)	Costs or levels of resourcing (that may have an impact on subject offerings, access to subjects via distance education or other providers)	Limited or no access to ancillary services such as occupational therapy or speech therapy	Limited or no access to ancillary services such as occupational therapy or speech therapy
Limited or no access to government-subsidised student transport	Cost of staff	Limited or no access to mental health services	Limited or no access to mental health services
Limited capacity for fundraising	Limited capacity for fundraising	Limited capacity for fundraising	Insufficient broadband width (eg for video conferencing)
Difficulties accessing teaching relief staff	Difficulty accessing relevant PD for teaching or teaching support staff	Limited subject offerings	Intermittent or unreliable internet access

In its report, *Educate Australia fair? Education inequality in Australia*¹⁰, Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre (BCEC) highlights area-specific differences in educational opportunity gaps and suggests that these differences 'invite either different solutions, or, at least, a flexible suite of programs and initiatives that can be weighted differently depending on the local environment and needs base'.

Responses to the AHISA survey suggest that differences in educational opportunity gaps may also be school-specific, not just area-specific, and dependent on a range of factors, as are responses to those gaps. For example, while staff recruitment is noted as a difficulty for many schools in regional and remote areas, for some the greatest difficulty is in the recruitment and retention of boarding house staff rather than teaching staff.



The nature of the challenge and the circumstances of the school determine available responses. For example, some schools seek to remedy the challenge of staff recruitment by recruiting staff from overseas under various visa arrangements, while one school in a 'Very Remote' area was undertaking training of and employing Aboriginal community members to meet staffing requirements to deliver sections of the curriculum.

While limited or no access to ancillary services or mental health services was mentioned by at least some Heads of schools in all areas, as would be expected, it is clearly a greater issue the greater the distance schools are from service hubs.

Limited or no access to medical services, ancillary services or mental health services could also present as a staffing challenge, with a flow-on effect in providing for students. One respondent mentioned that a teacher visiting such a service might need to travel several hours to take up an appointment, entailing an overnight stay. With no relief staff available, this then had an impact on remaining staff members who may have to cover their colleague's two-day absence.

AHISA's member survey undertaken in December 2019 to inform AHISA's submission to the Productivity Commission's inquiry into mental health further highlighted the impact of limited community health services on schooling provision. Some Heads commented that the most useful government assistance to help address student wellbeing would be funding support for external specialists such as psychologists, speech therapists, occupational therapists or counsellors to whom students could be directed, particularly for high-level mental health issues. Visits by GPs to schools to screen and provide support for students was another suggestion.

Boarding schools with students from remote areas also pointed to limited health services in students' home communities as problematic. One Head commented: 'We are a small school but large boarding including 12% Indigenous. The best thing for us would be to increase services in the bush so the students and parents can access professionals when things of a major nature occur. We can't keep them in boarding if they present with major issues like suicide ideation but then we have to send them home hours away from help or rely on telehealth.'

That is, for many Heads, opportunity gaps for students in regional and remote areas that could most usefully be filled by governments are perceived to be outside the education system – most typically in the health system or in provision of internet and broadband services.

The final report of the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education (IRRRE)¹¹ lists as the third of four priorities for action to improve educational opportunities in regional, rural and remote areas the need to address 'the patchiness of ICT' in regional, rural and remote locations:

The availability, accessibility and affordability of ICT for RRR schools, teachers, students, parents and communities have to be improved, and improved quickly. (Page 6)

AHISA's 2017 surveys confirm the importance of internet access and digital technologies for regional, rural and remote schools as a key means to overcome the 'tyranny of distance' and to expand their educational offerings and meet the individual learning needs of students as well as the professional development requirements of staff.

Reliable and affordable access to ICT is becoming increasingly important with the development of augmented reality and artificial intelligence enhancements to curriculum delivery and assessment.

1b Innovating to meet students' needs

Where schools have power and opportunity to effect change, Heads responding to AHISA's 2017 survey reported a range of strategies to provide a curriculum suited to students' needs and to promote student engagement, including (in order of number of mentions):

- Accessing online courses (which could include providing extension work for gifted and talented students through access to MOOCs)
- Using external vocational education and training providers, including industry providers
- Using video conferencing
- Participation in agricultural shows
- Offering subjects with a regional application, such as agricultural science, marine studies
- Linking curriculum with localised projects
- Offering co-curricular programs with a regional focus such as equestrian eventing, shooting, diving
- Establishing a school farm
- Transition programs during the first years of boarding to bridge literacy and numeracy gaps
- Partnering with other schools or across campuses to expand subject options
- Accessing government-provided distance education courses
- Offering an Indigenous language
- Creating links with regional universities.

One Head mentioned the school created its own courses to promote school engagement, such as short-term creative projects in visual art, craft or graphic design that would allow students to experience success in education and in a school environment. Another Head mentioned the school had established 'Academies of Excellence' for students in Years 7 to 10. The Academies are built on students' interests such as robotics, coding, drama, music, science and agriculture and involve a 10-week (term) project.

Some Heads reported their school was accessing programs, platforms and learning management systems such as Google Classroom and SEQTA, noting that digital media also provided an important way to connect and communicate with the community, including through live streaming of school events.

Heads reported a range of strategies are adopted to meet students' individual learning needs, including:

- Personalised learning plans for students, which may include the student's own learning goals
- Accessing other providers, including distance education and online courses
- Ongoing evaluation of assessment data to determine interventions
- Small class sizes
- Tutoring or homework 'boot' camps or homework clubs – before school, during lunch or after school, offered by school staff, older students or undergraduate university students
- Accessing mentors from the community or alumni

- Literacy and numeracy specialists available to help all students
- Teachers offer after hours online tutoring for students who are interstate or overseas on elite athlete training programs
- A ‘stage not age’ approach to choosing electives and senior secondary subjects
- Teacher professional development on differentiated teaching and learning
- Provision of a Learning Support teacher, to assist classroom teachers to modify programs and develop individual learning plans
- An Aboriginal education worker to support each subject offered
- Extended library hours.

1c Student aspirations

AHISA’s 2017 survey also sought information from members on factors having a negative impact on students’ educational experience or their aspirations and strategies schools adopted to overcome these challenges. While lack of aspiration for tertiary education or training need not be viewed as a ‘deficit’, it should be noted that remoteness has been identified as limiting further educational opportunities and therefore occupational opportunities for people in ‘Remote’ and ‘Very Remote’ areas.¹²

1.2 Top mentioned factors having had or continuing to have a negative impact on the educational experience/aspirations of students

INNER REGIONAL	OUTER REGIONAL	REMOTE	VERY REMOTE
Depressed local economic conditions	Depressed local economic conditions	Depressed local economic conditions	Health issues eg hearing disability
Limited further education or training opportunities in the local community	Lack of aspiration for tertiary education	Lack of aspiration for tertiary education	Lack of part-time employment opportunities for school-aged students
Lack of employment opportunities for school completers in their local community	Lack of employment opportunities for school completers in their local community	Limited opportunities for formalised early childhood learning	Lack of employment opportunities for school completers in their local community
Absenteeism	Limited cultural facilities in the local community	Health issues eg hearing disability	Limited opportunities for formalised early childhood learning
Dislocation from family	Dislocation from family	Absenteeism	Limited access to quality primary schooling opportunities
Student’s home environment	Absenteeism	Language difficulties	Language difficulties

As well as reporting significant external challenges to promoting student engagement or students’ aspirations for further education and training, Heads of regional and remote schools reported that lack of aspiration for tertiary education could itself be a factor in student disengagement. Student health issues were increasingly cited as an important factor influencing students’ educational experience or aspirations as remoteness increased.

While the survey results clearly reveal that some of the greatest challenges in raising students' aspirations for post-secondary education and training are difficult for schools in regional and remote areas to address, Heads reported a range of strategies are adopted by their school to motivate students, support students in realising their aspirations or to support students' transition to further education or training.

As well as tailoring curriculum offerings to meet students' needs, as described above, all those responding to AHISA's 2017 survey who were Heads of schools in 'Inner Regional', 'Outer Regional' and 'Remote' locations mentioned 'Visiting university open days' as a strategy commonly used to broaden students' knowledge of post-school options and raise aspirations.

Arranging student exchanges with city-based or overseas schools and arranging specialist VET placements were the strategies most often mentioned by Heads of schools in 'Very Remote' locations. Student exchanges arranged with city-based or overseas schools were also a commonly used strategy for 'Outer Regional' and 'Remote' schools.

Schools in 'Inner Regional' locations were more likely to draw on a wider range of strategies, including allowing students time for attendance at elite athlete training or other elite academic or sports events, arranging specialist VET placements, operating a buddy scheme with alumni, bringing in guest speakers or mounting specialist programs run by the school's careers adviser. Another strategy mentioned was supporting students to acquire the necessary bridging skills to enable them to access tertiary options.

These strategies and approaches suggest that, at the very least, governments should consider travel grants for secondary students in rural and remote schools to assist in attending university open days, undertaking student exchanges, or to attend special education opportunities such as youth leadership conferences or elite sports events.

Heads of rural and remote schools participating in AHISA's 2019 VET survey mentioned several innovations they had introduced through VET provision to promote students' learning opportunities and increase their post-school options, including:

- Initiating a course for students who are young mothers and who are attempting to gain a Higher School Certificate. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural arts are the basis for an enterprise/business project in both art and textiles. Students sell their products while learning skills and gaining certificates.
- Connecting with farmers and RTOs to facilitate the provision of agriculture courses for students.
- Introducing specialised units relating to the entertainment industry.
- Successfully linking with an external provider 400km distant to the school to deliver a Certificate IV Business course at the school.
- Collaborating with other schools to expand the courses available to students in all participating schools.
- Partnering with schools from other sectors in a joint venture to improve provision.
- Building relationships with local businesses to facilitate workplace learning programs.
- Containing costs by combining Year 11 and Year 12 classes to increase numbers in each class to allow for better teacher to student ratios.

1d Fostering entrepreneurialism

AHISA's 2017 survey reveals that schools are not complacent about external factors – such as depressed local economic conditions and a lack of employment opportunities for school completers – which impact on education provision and student aspiration.

Survey responses indicate that schools in 'Inner Regional' and 'Outer Regional' locations are already adopting or preparing to adopt a greater focus on supporting entrepreneurial activity among students. While some Heads mentioned an existing focus on entrepreneurship in the secondary Business Studies curriculum, others gave examples of programs or ventures established or supported by their school which was either related to or separate from the Business Studies curriculum, including:

- Encouraging students to engage in social entrepreneurialism
- Making it a requirement for students studying the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) to establish ventures to raise money for attendance at a VCAL camp
- Making it a major assessment task for Year 11 Business Studies students to create a business proposition which they then present to a panel of business professionals from the local community (in the style of the TV program, *Shark Tank*)
- Using a Conservation and Land Management course as a platform for growing trees for the community and land care organisations
- Establishing a student run café to put into practice financial literacy skills
- Making and posting YouTube clips on learning a language other than English
- Helping young mothers develop a business in partnership with their Aboriginal elders in fabric design and clothing and fashion accessories.

That is, schools in regional and remote locations are active in seeking ways to expand provision for students to help equip them to contribute to their local communities, and prepare them for existing work opportunities or to create new opportunities.

Schools themselves are entrepreneurial in creating strategies to address community health issues. For example, Macleay Vocational College, an 'Inner Regional' independent school in NSW, has a leadership role in the Kempsey Community Suicide Prevention program, including housing the program and running workshops on strengths-based approaches to suicide prevention and awareness. The program is part of the Australian Government's National Suicide Prevention Trial.

2. VET PROVISION IN REGIONAL AND REMOTE SCHOOLS

AHISA’s 2019 survey of vocational education and training (VET) provision in members’ schools found that, while just over a quarter of schools are Registered Training Organisations (RTOs), most schools – including schools in regional and remote areas – seek external providers or use auspice RTO arrangements (that is, training and/or assessment is undertaken by the school, while an external RTO issues the qualification or Statement of Attainment). Many schools provide VET programs under multiple arrangements, as they seek to match courses with student need.

The survey data also show that the main educational field¹³ for which VET provision is made by schools in regional and remote areas is ‘Food, hospitality and personal services’, followed by the fields ‘Engineering and related technologies’, ‘Information technology’ and ‘Agriculture, environmental and related studies’.

While regional and remote schools offer a wider range of courses to Certificate II level than to Certificate III or IV level, AHISA Heads responding to the VET survey reported that they consider Certificate III courses to provide a deeper learning experience for students, to be more engaging and to establish a better pathway to further education and training. This suggests that further research may be useful to assess the potential of regional and remote schools in all sectors to promote or offer Certificate III level VET and what support might be needed by schools if they are to achieve this.

2.1 Highest level of VET certification offered through all forms of provision (RTO, auspice RTO etc), by field of education – regional and remote schools only

Number of respondents selecting the option					
	Cert I	Cert II	Cert III	Cert IV	Total mentions
Natural and physical sciences	0	1	0	0	1
Information technology	3	7	5	1	16
Engineering and related technologies	3	11	3	0	17
Architecture and building	2	5	2	0	9
Agriculture, environmental and related studies	2	9	4	0	15
Health	0	4	2	2	8
Education	0	3	3	0	6
Management and commerce	0	2	2	2	6
Society and culture	1	1	0	0	2
Creative arts	2	4	6	0	12
Food, hospitality and personal services	5	17	4	0	26
	18	64	31	5	

Also of interest from the AHISA VET survey results is that some 96 per cent of responding Heads leading schools in rural and remote areas reported that their school participates in school-based apprenticeship or traineeship programs, compared to only 58 per cent of schools in Major City locations.

While the high cost of VET provision was mentioned in AHISA’s survey as a major challenge for respondents’ schools generally, Heads of schools in regional and remote areas reported specific ways that schools could be supported to expand their VET provision:



- *Compliance.* More schools could be encouraged to pursue RTO status if the compliance burden is eased. One suggestion is that schools as existing education providers could be a special category of registration for RTO status, recognising that independent schools which are RTOs already meet significant compliance, reporting and audit obligations through state/territory school registration as well as ASIC, ACNC and federal Department of Education and Training requirements.
- *Staff qualifications.* School staff members offering VET courses are required to hold a Certificate IV in Training and Assessment. Prior recognition given to tertiary qualified teachers who seek the Certificate could encourage more teachers to participate in VET provision. VET staff who are also teachers (common in many regional and remote schools) must meet rigorous and frequent professional development requirements to maintain both their teacher registration and their Certificate IV qualification. To ease this burden, the Certificate IV qualification should be recognised for at least five years.
- *VET course fee subsidies.* Many families cannot afford school fees plus VET course fees. Subsidising fully, or in part, students' enrolment in externally provided VET courses could encourage greater take up of VET by students, contributing to skills acquisition and exploration of career options.

3. QUALITY TEACHING IN REGIONAL AND REMOTE SCHOOLS

Heads of regional and remote schools responding to AHISA's 2017 survey mentioned a number of strategies adopted to support a high quality teaching workforce in their schools, including (in order of number of mentions):

- Mentoring or coaching of staff, including development of a teacher-mentor role
- Providing access to online professional development courses
- Offering salary/conditions inducements
- Partnering with other schools to create collegial teacher professional exchanges, including short-term placements
- Exchange opportunities
- Offering time release for postgraduate studies
- Recruiting staff from overseas
- Linking with initial teacher education providers.

3a Staff recruitment

As can be seen in Table 1.1 above, Heads responding to AHISA's 2017 survey noted difficulties in recruiting staff as a major challenge for their schools, although the nature of the difficulty experienced is dependent on the circumstances of the school. For example, as mentioned above, for some schools in regional and remote areas the greatest difficulty is in the recruitment and retention of boarding house staff rather than teaching staff.

Survey responses also showed that the solutions open to schools are dependent on the nature of the challenge faced and the circumstances of the school. For example, some schools seek to remedy the challenge of staff recruitment by recruiting staff from overseas under various visa arrangements, while one school in a 'Very Remote' area was undertaking training of and employing Aboriginal community members to meet staffing requirements to deliver sections of the curriculum.

Changes to visa arrangements and re-classification of occupations in the education sector for visa eligibility – particularly the reclassification of occupations eligible under the Temporary Skill Shortage (TSS) visa program, from the medium-term and long-term Skilled Migration occupation list to the short-term list – have proved a challenge to schools in regional and remote areas relying on overseas recruitment for teaching and non-teaching staff. AHISA continues to advocate¹⁴ for a number of occupations to be re-instated to the medium-term and long-term occupation list, including 'Education Manager', 'Specialist Manager' and 'Education Adviser' (all of which could cover a school leadership role such as Head of Senior School or Director of Curriculum not carrying a teaching load), 'Primary School Teacher', 'Middle School Teacher', 'Residential Care Officer' and 'Student Counsellor'.

AHISA has called for the Australian Government to adopt a more nuanced approach to determining skills shortages for the purposes of TSS processes, to avoid restricting the capacity of schools to fill skills gaps.

3b Teacher professional development

Heads responding to the 2017 survey mentioned that professional development opportunities for teachers not only support teaching quality but can also support staff recruitment and retention. This is particularly true of professional development that supports teachers' specific areas of interest or career advancement.

One Head mentioned the school had created two leadership positions for experienced teachers – Director of Quality Teaching and Learning, and Head of Professional Development and Teacher Accreditation. One Head mentioned that the school allowed teaching staff to select professional development courses according to their greatest perceived need or interest, including courses in youth mental health and restorative justice, or teachers might choose to complete VET courses in which students had also expressed interest.

Some independent schools in regional and remote locations have already forged or are in the process of considering post-secondary education and training options to address the issue of professional development of staff. For example, two Heads commented that their schools have partnered with universities to act as a regional centre for provision of graduate diploma or masters degree courses in education. This suggests partnerships between regional and remote schools and universities could be a viable option for the provision of higher education and professional development for teachers – contributing to quality schooling provision in regional and remote locations and supporting recruitment and retention of teachers.

While one Head responding to AHISA's survey reported their school was considering applying for certification as a provider of certified professional development of teaching staff to overcome the time/cost challenges staff development represents in regional and remote locations, online course delivery is seen as an important means of overcoming time and cost challenges in delivering professional development for teachers.

4. SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

It should be noted that independent schools in regional and remote locations are helping to expand educational and/or social opportunities not only for their own students but for other children and adults in their communities.

Almost all respondents to AHISA's 2017 survey of schools in regional and remote locations mentioned that their school's facilities were accessible to the community in some way, either for use of facilities such as sports or performing arts facilities, for cross-cultural exchange or volunteer service, for course provision to the wider community or even to supply basic needs for food and shelter.

One Head mentioned classes for teaching the local Indigenous language were open to the community, while another Head said the school's students taught Aboriginal cultural dance and didgeridoo to younger students in other schools. Another Head mentioned the school was open for extended hours six days a week, 51 weeks of the year, to be a point of access to food and shelter for students and community youth.

Of interest is that 40 per cent of survey respondents reported their school has purpose-built facilities to serve both community and school needs.

Most respondents also mentioned that their school linked with the community through service learning projects to enhance community wellbeing, linking teaching of the curriculum with community projects or participation in community festivals or programs.

Over a third of respondents reported their school invited Aboriginal elders to offer cultural programs or teach language, in a voluntary or paid capacity.

5. AWAY FROM HOME EDUCATIONAL PROVISION

Educational provision in out of area schools under hostel, home stay, boarding or other residential arrangements is an important means of supporting educational opportunity for students from regional and remote locations and assists in fostering – and fulfilling – students’ aspirations, especially for entry to university courses.

In 2017, to inform its submission to the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education, AHISA surveyed members leading boarding schools in ‘Major City’ locations and Heads of schools in regional and remote locations making provision for students living away from home. The survey questions explored the challenges faced by regional and remote students living away from home to attend school – whether that school is itself in a regional or remote location or in a ‘Major City’ location. We also questioned members on the strategies their schools are adopting to overcome these challenges.

5a Challenges experienced by students living away from home

The 2017 survey confirmed that students from regional and remote areas living away from home to attend school face significant challenges.

5.1 Top mentioned negative impacts on students’ away-from-home experience (in order of number of mentions)

MAJOR CITY BOARDING SCHOOLS	REGIONAL AND REMOTE SCHOOLS
Academic achievement gap	Dislocation from family
Dislocation from family	Academic achievement gap
Cultural transitions (eg bush to city)	Limitations of home to boarding school transition processes
Lack of or limited cultural support	Cultural transitions (eg bush to town)
Lack of family support	Language differences

Heads noted a number of factors – past and present – that may contribute to educational opportunity gaps for students from regional and remote areas living away from home, outlined in the table below.

5.2 Top mentioned past/present factors having a negative impact on educational experience/aspirations of students living away from home (in order of number of mentions)*

MAJOR CITY BOARDING SCHOOLS	REGIONAL AND REMOTE SCHOOLS
Limited access to quality primary schooling opportunities	Depressed local economic conditions
Depressed economic conditions in student's home community	Lack of employment opportunities for school completers in their local community
Limited opportunities for formalised early childhood learning	Limited further education or training opportunities in the local community
Lack of aspiration for tertiary education	Lack of aspiration for tertiary education
Lack of employment opportunities for school completers in their home community	Limited cultural facilities in the local community
Language difficulties	Dislocation from family

*Some Heads noted the difficulty of responding to this question as there could be significant disparities in the prior educational and life experiences of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students living away from home

5b Strategies schools adopt to support students living away from home

Heads reported that their schools adopted a range of strategies to help overcome the challenges experienced by students living away from home.

5.3 Strategies to help students living away from home overcome personal and educational challenges (in order of number of mentions)

MAJOR CITY BOARDING SCHOOLS	REGIONAL AND REMOTE SCHOOLS
Targeted literacy and numeracy teaching/tutoring	Targeted literacy and numeracy teaching/tutoring
Visits by school staff to students' homes	Specific curricular or co-curricular offerings to appeal to boarding students
Buddy system with day students or city families	Buddy system with day students or school families
Facilities for students to Skype with parents	Visits by school staff to students' homes
Long-term relationships with Indigenous communities	Facilities for students to Skype with parents
Programs for cultural and language recognition and support	Long-term relationships with Indigenous communities
Accommodation for students' parents while visiting their child	Collection of students from their home communities at the beginning of each academic year or each term

Other strategies reported by Heads to help students living away from home to overcome personal and educational challenges include:

- Transition programs involving students' previous teachers and schools
- An online transition program for Year 6 students entering boarding in Year 7 to support networking with other incoming boarding students and which also support academic preparation

- Cultural training for staff and student peers
- Employment of a school Boarding Liaison Officer
- Employment of a full-time Indigenous Program Coordinator
- Employment of Aboriginal education workers
- Instituting a strong Indigenous cultural program, including a dance program
- Inviting Indigenous elders to offer cultural programs or teach language
- Visits to towns or communities from which students come rather than to students' homes
- Live streaming of school events so that they can be viewed by boarding students' parents
- Funding and engaging boarding students in a laptop program prior to their entering the school
- Tutoring prior to students entering the school
- Establishing transition programs aimed at bridging literacy and numeracy gaps experienced by students in their first years of boarding
- Development of individual learning plans
- Tutoring programs, including specialist subject mentors
- Intensive tutoring in Years 7 and 8 to help boarders bridge any achievement gap
- Tutoring/mentoring by alumni
- Appointing Aboriginal university students to work with Aboriginal boarders after school
- Offering co-curricular programs with a regional focus eg equestrian eventing, shooting, diving
- Linking curriculum to regional/remote area circumstances
- Participation in agricultural shows.

5c How governments can help make a difference for students living away from home

Heads responding to AHISA's 2017 survey on provision for regional and remote students living away from home were invited to select from a list of suggested actions any recommendations they would make to governments for programs or services that they believed would make a tangible difference to the quality of education their schools could offer. Heads could also provide additional suggestions. The recommendations suggested by Heads, in order of the number of mentions, are set out in the table below.

5.4 How governments can help make a difference to provision for students from rural and remote locations educated out of area (in order of number of mentions)

MAJOR CITY BOARDING SCHOOLS	REGIONAL AND REMOTE SCHOOLS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Full funding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students irrespective of the SES of the non-government school they attend • Access to federal or state/territory government capital funding for new residential facilities or facilities refurbishment • Full and free access to government-provided services for students with disability, such as speech therapy, irrespective of the school they attend* • Full and free access for students to government-funded mental health services, irrespective of the school they attend • Free access to government-provided distance education courses for students from regional, remote and very remote areas irrespective of the school they attend • Introduction of by-passing laws in all jurisdictions so that students attending boarding schools in other states/territories are eligible for state recurrent funding • Increased federal recurrent funding for boarding students • Extending Abstudy to cover the cost of parents coming to Year 12 graduation or valedictory events • Funding to cover the cost of additional academic support out of school hours, particularly in literacy and numeracy skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to federal or state/territory government capital funding for new residential facilities or facilities refurbishment • Free access for students to government-provided distance education courses • Full funding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students irrespective of the SES of the school they attend • Free access to NBN Co's Sky Muster distance education satellite service • Federal government loan subsidies for capital expenditure • Reduction of local government rates, fees, charges • More housing for transient youth • Access to grants to cover programs such as keeping young mothers at school • Support for ICT resources and maintenance • Funding for transport (buses, fuel, drivers) to collect students and return them home • Increased support for students with disability, especially in areas where services are non-existent or under-resourced • Recognition of the role independent schools play in providing educational choice in regional areas • Recognition that independent schools may be the sole provider in some remote areas

* It should be noted that, depending on the state or territory, once a student enters a non-government school they may lose significant entitlements such as free access to government support services, adding considerably to the cost of education for children attending non-government schools. This is of critical concern when students enter secondary boarding with hearing or language difficulties that were not diagnosed in their home location and who may need intensive 'catch up' support.

6. FOCUS ON EDUCATIONAL PROVISION FOR INDIGENOUS STUDENTS FROM REGIONAL AND REMOTE AREAS

In 2016-17 AHISA made a two-part submission to the Inquiry into Educational Opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students conducted by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs in the 44th Parliament, and resumed in the 45th Parliament.

Some of the findings from the submission are presented here to supplement the findings from AHISA member surveys already reported above.

6a Indigenous scholarship programs

A quality school education is a proven pathway to accessing and completing tertiary education, and many AHISA members' schools have a long history of providing quality education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students through residential scholarship programs, both with and without the support of the Australian Government and/or philanthropic organisations. The opportunities provided by such programs are desired by many Indigenous families for their children.

AHISA's 'Educational Opportunities' submission confirms the viability and success of residential scholarships for Indigenous students from regional and remote areas, and notes a range of factors that contribute to this success, including:

- Sensitivity of school communities to the cultural backgrounds of Indigenous students is important in helping students develop a sense of belonging at school
- Efforts by schools to promote and celebrate Indigenous cultures and support Indigenous students in the expression of their home cultures are important in helping students maintain their cultural identity
- Developing trust through long-term relationships between schools and remote Indigenous communities helps students transition to city boarding schools
- A higher proportion of Indigenous students within a school can augment students' sense of belonging
- The commitment of school leaders underwrites program innovation and success
- High expectations of students as a component of the 'academic press' that has been shown to contribute to overall student achievement in independent schools is also a factor in the achievement of Indigenous students
- The holistic care of students in boarding houses – where attention to the physical and emotional wellbeing of students is as important as academic studies – and the provision of safe learning environments supports student engagement and academic achievement
- Establishing post-school pathways supports the long-term success of metropolitan residential programs for Indigenous students.

AHISA recommends continuation and even expansion of Australian Government support for residential scholarship programs for Indigenous students from regional and remote areas. Not only is this support of direct benefit for students, it also encourages contributions from private individuals, school communities and philanthropic organisations.

6b Between-school collaborations

AHISA members' schools are also supporting Indigenous students in regional and remote regions by establishing collaborative partnerships with schools providing schooling to Indigenous students on-country. Importantly, this support may be in the form of teacher professional development, helping to reduce the professional isolation of staff in remote schools and improve practice. For example:

- The Armidale School, Armidale, NSW, has built a relationship with Minimbah Primary School in Armidale (both schools are classified as 'Inner Regional') which encompasses student-to-student mentoring (secondary TAS students mentoring MPS students), sharing of facilities and shared sporting and cultural opportunities. This collaboration also includes teacher professional exchange and support.
- Christ Church Grammar School, Perth ('Major City') partners with Yakanarra Community School in Fitzroy Crossing, WA ('Very Remote') to offer combined classes through video streaming, student and teacher exchange and teacher professional development.
- Woodleigh School on Victoria's Mornington Peninsula ('Major City') partners with the Wugularr community in the Northern Territory ('Very Remote') to offer teacher professional development and cultural exchange for students in both schools.
- Under partnership arrangements between Trinity Grammar School in Kew, Victoria ('Major City') and the Gunbalanya community in west Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory ('Very Remote'), senior Trinity students travel on a regular basis to Gunbalanya to offer a science program to students and one to one student mentoring.

It should be noted that digital technologies are important in assisting continuity of teacher professional exchange between city/regional and remote schools, and for building relationships between children and between staff in geographically distant communities.

It is also important to recognise that there is no 'one size fits all' model of between-school collaborations. Partnerships between city schools and remote schools and communities require flexibility and the freedom to generate collaborations that are the most beneficial and which reflect the needs and capacities of those involved.

The OECD notes that 'practices that benefit Indigenous students also benefit non-Indigenous students'.¹⁵ Some of the ideas contributed by school leaders to AHISA's 'Educational Opportunities' submission for government sponsorship of collaborative programs may therefore be of interest for closing the opportunity gap for all students in regional and remote areas, such as:

- Seed funding for 'pop up' schools in regional and remote areas; for example, pop up schools to deliver specific programs in STEM subjects; these 'schools' could deliver short courses to students and professional learning for teachers
- Funding to support teacher exchanges and ongoing collaborative professional development of teachers in remote community schools
- Capital funding for schools willing to establish teacher visitation programs to remote communities to build teacher accommodation in these communities, suitable for short and longer-term stays
- Funding to facilitate teacher secondments between 'Major City' and schools in regional and remote areas.



6c Innovative schooling provision for Indigenous students

Former and current AHISA members have led their schools or developed new ventures to provide quality educational experiences for Indigenous students from regional and remote areas, both on-country and out of country. For example:

- Melbourne Indigenous Transition School, Richmond, Victoria offers a one-year residential and academic program to assist Indigenous students from regional and remote communities to transition successfully to Melbourne boarding schools. (Former AHISA member, Rick Tudor OAM helped found the school after retiring as Headmaster of Trinity Grammar School, Victoria.)
- Yiramalay/Wesley Studio School near Fitzroy Crossing, WA ('Very Remote') was founded by Wesley College, Melbourne, Victoria ('Major City') as a senior secondary school to provide on- country education for Indigenous students. Wesley College serves as a remote campus for Yiramalay students, and Yiramalay serves as a remote campus for Wesley students.
- Under an agreement with Darkinjung Local Aboriginal Land Council, Barker College in Hornsby, NSW ('Major City') has established a regional primary campus, Darkinjung Barker College, to serve Indigenous students within the Wyong region. Although Wyong is designated as a 'Major City' location, Darkinjung Barker is proving successful in overcoming the challenge of compounding of educational disadvantage and could serve as a model for the establishment of schools in regional and remote locations.

Key learnings from these and other innovative forms of provision are detailed in AHISA's 'Educational Opportunities' submission. What is important to note here is that the success of such ventures depends on the trust developed between schools and Indigenous communities and the long-term nature of those relationships.

7. THE INTERACTION OF EDUCATION PROVISION AND HEALTH SERVICES IN REGIONAL AND REMOTE AREAS

Responses of Heads of regional and remote schools to AHISA's 2017 survey, as outlined above, demonstrate that education provision in regional and remote locations cannot be separated from economic, social, health and housing issues experienced by students. Limited or no access to medical services, ancillary services or mental health services in regional and remote locations can also present a challenge to recruitment and retention of staff, with flow-on effects in education provision for students.

This finding is supported by the evidence from AHISA members' schools gathered to inform AHISA's submission to the Inquiry into Educational Opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students and by a 2019 survey of members conducted to inform AHISA's submission to the Productivity Commission's mental health inquiry.

Responses to the 2019 survey highlighted some key issues for schools in regional or remote areas or schools whose students come from remote areas:

- Some Heads commented that the most useful government assistance would be funding support for external specialists such as psychologists, speech therapists, occupational therapists or counsellors to whom students could be directed, particularly for high-level mental health issues. Visits by GPs to schools to screen and provide support for students was another suggestion. That is, for many Heads, the gaps that could most usefully be filled and have most impact on students are perceived to be in the health system, not the education system.
- One Head pointed to significant issues for boarding schools catering to students from remote areas with scant community resources: 'We are a small school but large boarding including 12% Indigenous. The best thing for us would be to increase services in the bush so the students and parents can access professionals when things of a major nature occur. We can't keep them in boarding if they present with major issues like suicide ideation but then we have to send them home hours away from help or rely on telehealth.'

This suggests that if the Australian Government decides to appoint a commissioner to oversee the implementation of a national regional and remote education strategy, an important role of the commissioner should be to liaise with the National Rural Health Commissioner. ■

NOTES

- ¹ AHISA's submission to the Inquiry was in two parts and may be accessed at http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House/Indigenous_Affairs/Educational_Opportunities/Submissions.
- ² Submissions to the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education are posted at <https://submissions.education.gov.au/Forms/IRRRRE/pages/index>.
- ³ AHISA's submission to the Expert Review is posted at https://www.ahisa.edu.au/AHISA/Advocacy/Submission_Resources/Submissions_2019/Expert_Review_of_Australia_s_VET_system.aspx.
- ⁴ Information on the Strategy is found at <https://www.education.gov.au/national-regional-rural-and-remote-education-strategy>. AHISA's submission is posted at https://www.ahisa.edu.au/AHISA/Advocacy/Submission_Resources/Submissions_2019/RRRE_national_strategy.aspx.
- ⁵ AHISA's submission to the Productivity Commission's inquiry (no 734, 22/2/2020) is posted at <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/current/mental-health/submissions>.
- ⁶ Education Council (2014) *Preparing secondary students for work: A framework for vocational learning and VET delivered to secondary students*. Prepared by Education Services Australia. Accessed at <https://docs.education.gov.au/documents/preparing-secondary-students-work>.
- ⁷ Welch A, Helme S & S Lamb S (2007) Rurality and inequality in education: The Australian experience, in Teese R, Lamb S & Duru-Bellat M (eds) *International studies in education inequality, theory and policy Volume 2: Inequality in education systems*, Springer, Netherlands: 272. As quoted in NSW Department of Education and Communities Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (2013) *Rural and remote education: Literature review*, page 2.
- ⁸ Guenther J, Disbray S & Osborne S (2016) *Red dirt education: A compilation of learnings from the Remote Education Systems project*. Alice Springs.
- ⁹ McKinley E (2017) From inequality to quality: Challenging the debate on Indigenous education in, Bentley T & Savage GC (2017) *Educating Australia: Challenges for the decade ahead*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press; pp191-205.
- ¹⁰ Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre (2017) *Educate Australia fair? Education inequality in Australia*. Focus on the States Series, No 5. Curtin Business School, Curtin University.
- ¹¹ Halsey J (2018) *Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education: Final report*. Accessed at https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/01218_independent_review_accessible.pdf.
- ¹² See for example Tomaszewski W, Perales F & Xiang N (2017) *School experiences, career guidance, and the university participation of young people from three equity groups in Australia*. National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE), Curtin University.
- ¹³ The fields of education referred to are those reported in the annual National Report on Schooling in Australia. See [https://www.acara.edu.au/reporting/national-report-on-schooling-in-australia-data-portal/participation-in-vocational-education-and-training-\(vet\)-including-vet-in-schools#view4](https://www.acara.edu.au/reporting/national-report-on-schooling-in-australia-data-portal/participation-in-vocational-education-and-training-(vet)-including-vet-in-schools#view4).
- ¹⁴ As well as making regular submissions to departmental Traffic Light consultations (most recently to the Department of Employment, Skills, Small and Family Business Skilled Migration Occupation List Traffic Light Bulletin, March 2020 review), AHISA submitted to the 2018 Senate inquiry into the effectiveness of the current temporary skilled visa system in targeting genuine skills shortages. AHISA's submission is posted at



https://www.ahisa.edu.au/AHISA/Advocacy/Submission_Resources/Submissions_2018/Effectiveness_of_Temporary_Skills_Shortages_visa_system.aspx

¹⁵ OECD (2017) *Promising practices in supporting success for Indigenous students*. Paris: OECD Publishing. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264279421-en>.