

**LA TROBE UNIVERSITY'S SUBMISSION TO
THE HOUSE STANDING COMMITTEE ON
EMPLOYMENT, EDUCATION AND TRAINING**

March 2020

**Education in Remote and Complex
Environments**

ENQUIRIES
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- La Trobe University is a State-wide university covering central and north-eastern Victoria with campuses at Albury-Wodonga, Bendigo, Mildura and Shepparton.
- La Trobe has a deep interest and proven track-record in improving RRR educational outcomes.
- La Trobe seeks to work with Government to support its stated commitment to improving education participation and outcomes. In this submission, we outline four key issues for the Committee's consideration:
 - The urgent need to fully fund the implementation of the Napthine review recommendations
 - The importance of ensuring the viability of regionally delivered higher education
 - The need for a regionally-based model for career advice and information complemented by a whole-of-community approach
 - The need for evidence-based research to underpin RRR policy interventions and the case for a regional, rural and remote research education policy centre

INTRODUCTION

La Trobe welcomes the opportunity to respond to this Inquiry and the Committee's aim to examine how the Government is implementing the National Regional, Rural and Remote Education Strategy (Naphthine review) and the recommendations of the earlier Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education (the Halsey Review)¹. La Trobe participated in both inquiries, welcoming their conclusions and calling on the Government to provide adequate funding to allow for their full implementation. A copy of our submissions is attached.

La Trobe welcomes the Government's commitment, as reiterated by the Minister for Education Dan Tehan during his address to the 2020 Universities Australia conference, to put regional and rural students at the centre of the Government's focus and to advance the recommendations of the Naphthine review.

As a State-wide university covering central and north-eastern Victoria with campuses at Albury-Wodonga, Bendigo, Mildura and Shepparton in addition to our main Melbourne campus in Bundoora, La Trobe has a deep interest in seeing a national lift in RRR educational outcomes. Our footprint includes a wide range of communities and socio-economic groups, making us one of the largest higher education providers in regional Victoria. We take pride in the fact that there are close to 9000 students from RRR areas studying at our campuses².

La Trobe's commitment to expanding participation in and access to higher education is set out in the Preamble to our enabling Act:

La Trobe's founding mission was, and remains, to serve the community of Victoria for the purposes of higher education, for the education, economic, social and cultural benefit of Victorians and for wider Australian and international communities.

From inception, La Trobe has been particularly focussed on providing access to quality higher education to those from disadvantaged backgrounds and has become an internationally recognised leader in this field³.

This submission will focus on four key issues:

- The urgent need to fully fund the implementation of the Naphthine review recommendations
- The importance of ensuring the viability of regionally delivered higher education
- The need for a regionally-based model for career advice and information complemented by a whole-of-community approach
- The need for evidence-based research to underpin RRR policy interventions – the case for a regional, rural and remote research education policy centre.

La Trobe would welcome the opportunity to present to the Committee.

¹ '[Committee to examine regional, rural and remote education attainment gap](#)', Media Release, 2 February 2020

² Department of Education 2017 Equity Statistics)

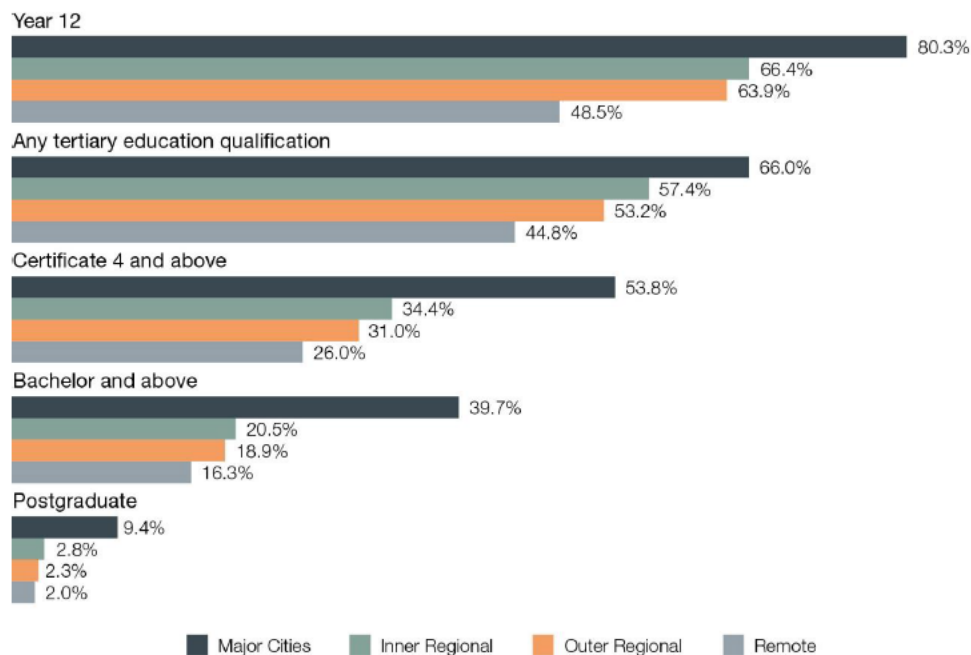
³ La Trobe University Act 2009.

KEY ISSUES FOR THE INQUIRY

1. The urgent need to fully fund the implementation of the Naphthine review recommendations

Along with the rest of the sector, La Trobe welcomed the report and recommendations of the Naphthine review. La Trobe also notes Minister Dan Tehan's commitment, as reiterated in his speech to the 2020 Universities Australia conference, to put regional and rural students at the centre of the Government's focus and to advance the recommendations of the Naphthine review. **Although initiatives have already been taken by the Government to address the regional, rural and remote educational gap attainment, the gap continues across all levels of education.** As shown in Figure 1 below (drawn from the Naphthine report), the stark disparity in education attainment rates between metropolitan and RRR areas is particularly pronounced at university level in remote and very remote areas.

Figure 1. Education attainment rates, 2016



Source: Year 12 rates are for people aged 19. Tertiary qualifications are for people aged 25-34 years. Remote includes Remote and Very Remote Categories. Any tertiary education qualification includes VET in Schools. Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (2016) Census of Population and Housing.

From La Trobe's perspective, the data is not surprising as we experience first-hand the challenges of increasing higher education participation and attainment in regional Victoria. A simple look at attainment levels in select non-metropolitan federal electorates (see Table 1) around Australia, including those where La Trobe has a regional campus, brings the picture closer to home with attainment rates consistently lower than state and national averages. This is a national problem but also a very local one, experienced across Australia.

Table 1: Education attainment rates (Bachelor Degree and above) in select Commonwealth Electoral Divisions (2016)

Commonwealth Electoral Division	% of Population with a Bachelor Degree or Higher Level of Education (for people aged 15 years or over)
Bendigo, VIC <i>La Trobe's Bendigo campus</i>	18.3%
Indi, VIC <i>La Trobe's Albury-Wodonga campus</i>	13.9%
Murray, VIC [now Nicholls] <i>La Trobe's Shepparton campus</i>	10.7%
Mallee, VIC <i>La Trobe's Mildura campus</i>	10.1%
Wannon, VIC	12.0%
VICTORIA	24.3%
Bowman, QLD	15.5%
QUEENSLAND	18.3%
New England, NSW	13.5%
Farrer, NSW <i>Within the catchment area for La Trobe's Albury-Wodonga and Mildura campuses</i>	11.6%
Hume, NSW	13.8%
NEW SOUTH WALES	23.4%
Mayo, SA	19.1%
SOUTH AUSTRALIA	18.5%
AUSTRALIA	22.0%

Source: 2016 Census (Quick Stats)

To help break the cycle of sub-optimal RRR attainment, **La Trobe strongly recommends that the Government fully fund in its 2020 Budget the implementation of its National Regional, Rural and Remote Education Strategy**. In our view, **implementation** will deliver a cost-effective step-change for regional communities across Australia and have a ripple effect to earlier stages of education. La Trobe recommends the following priorities in particular:

- providing demand-driven funding for university places in regional areas (supported through increased funding for enabling and sub-bachelor programs) and to regional, rural and remote Indigenous university students. Enabling and sub-bachelor places are particularly important in areas where students are not sufficiently prepared for tertiary education. For instance, in

our regional campuses we experience very high demand for our Tertiary Preparation Program (TPP) which is oversubscribed. Additional enabling places would enable regionally-based universities to meet this demand particularly in RRR areas;

- a regionally focused Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program scheme. This should be additional to the existing funding for HEPPP;
- a new grants program to enhance research capacity on regional campuses;
- establishing national research infrastructure in regional, rural and remote areas;
- a regionally-based model for independent, professional career advice (see further detail in Section 3 below); and
- establishing a RRR Education Commissioner.

The Government's adoption of these recommendations would go a long way towards improving education outcomes in regional, rural and remote communities, and help to improve the viability of regionally delivered higher education, a point which is further explored in Section 2.

Recommendations

- Deliver in the 2020 Federal Budget a regional education package with fully-funded implementation of the recommendations of the Napthine review.

2. The importance of ensuring the viability of regionally delivered higher education

In its evidence to this Committee⁴, the Department of Education Skills and Employment discussed the policy options available to the Government to lift opportunity for regional students. In particular it remarked on the tension between, on the one hand, supporting students to move to and study at institutions of their choice, and on the other hand providing additional and direct support to regional areas to expand local study options. The Department noted it is conscious of the **'cornerstone community contribution that a university or a higher education provider can make and to ensure that the system supports that'**. We would argue that these policy options should not be mutually exclusive, and that the ambitions and preferences of the students themselves should be a central consideration.

The viability of regional campuses is crucial against the overall challenge of improving rural, regional and remote education outcomes. Universities play a central role in raising aspiration in the broader communities which they serve. La Trobe's **School Partnerships Program**, for example, is a very successful program which works collaboratively with identified schools to raise awareness of higher education and inform career aspiration by providing access to a range of activities that engage students and their school communities. In 2019, for instance, 30.2 per cent of surveyed students indicated they were more interested in going to university after an SPP event, with an additional 15.6 per cent indicating they had not considered university before but were now interested. Regional patterns indicated even higher values (16.9 per cent now interested). With additional government support, there is an opportunity to extend this program to schools located in more remote areas, such as in Corryong (North-Eastern Victoria).

⁴ Public Hearing, Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training, 5 February 2020 (Proof Committee Hansard)

Another successful example is [La Trobe's Pathway Program](#) operating from our Albury-Wodonga and Shepparton campuses, which aims to raise aspiration and increase educational engagement among Year 11 and Year 12 students to participate in higher education. The pathway program consists of a structured framework of mentoring, well-being workshops, academic capacity building and university preparedness which is embedded in the curriculum of participating government schools over an 18-month period. Originally trialled at the Albury-Wodonga campus, the program has been highly successful – with a 44 per cent increase in student enrolment from 2018 to 2019 from participating schools. Such initiatives would not be possible without the presence of regional campuses. Support for similar programs, which are currently funded by the university and through philanthropic means, would enable us to introduce it at other regional campuses and reach a greater number of students in surrounding communities.

Across Australia, there are very few campuses located in remote locations. However, even where universities are located in a regional rather than remote area, they may well provide a better fit for remote students than a metropolitan campus. For example, regionally based universities are often better positioned to offer 'on-country' learning for Indigenous Australian students.

We also know that people from a RRR community who learn in a RRR community are more likely to graduate and work in a RRR community. Last year, 90 per cent of La Trobe's Shepparton and Mildura nursing graduates attained employment at hospitals and health services in rural and regional Victoria, including in isolated towns such as Corryong. Regional university campuses are fundamental to the provision of much needed community services and stimulation of local economies, not just in regional centres but to surrounding communities.

The higher costs of regional higher education delivery

A number of federal and state policy settings are making it increasingly difficult to maintain regional higher education delivery and, in La Trobe's case, ensure a continuing presence in regional Victoria. The government-commissioned Deloitte Access Economics report (2017) concluded that in higher education "teaching and scholarships costs are 17 per cent higher for regional students"⁵. La Trobe submits that the current regional loading that universities receive is insufficient to cover this cost. The funding freeze introduced at the end of 2017 had a disproportionate impact on universities with regional campuses, which unlike metropolitan universities, have limited means of raising funds from other sources such as international student revenue.

At a state level, the 2019 introduction of free TAFE in Victoria, while opening welcome opportunities to regional communities, has impacted demand for equivalent Higher Education courses in already very thin markets, as shown in Table 2.

⁵ Deloitte Access Economics (2017), The Cost of Delivery of Higher Education

Table 2: La Trobe Demand 2018 v 2020

La Trobe Demand* 2018 v 2020 - TAFE equivalent subjects - total (subjects include Business and Accounting, Education, Nursing and Social Work)					
	2018	2019	2020	Total change	Total change (%)
Albury-Wodonga	233	206	190	-43	-18.5%
Bendigo	1544	1215	1014	-530	-34.3%
Mildura	260	161	127	-133	-51.2%
Shepparton	339	234	195	-144	-42.5%
All regional	2376	1816	1526	-850	-35.8%
All campuses	8350	7114	6571	-1779	-21.3%
NB: all data is based on December preference data or equivalent. *Demand is measured by the combination of VTAC preferences and non-year 12 preferences.					

These factors point to the need for a national evidence-based approach to understand the comprehensive issues impacting regional, rural and remote education, a point which is further explored in Section 4.

Recommendations

- Support the viability of regional higher education delivery through a regional loading which adequately reflects the cost of regional delivery.
- Provide support for the expansion of pathway programs which have been proven to raise aspiration and higher education participation in RRR communities through an additional, regional HEPPP.

3. A regionally-based model for career advice complemented by a whole-of-community approach to inform and support community aspiration

The role of professional career advice and information in a child's education journey and the likelihood of a child making a successful transition to further employment and/or study cannot be overstated.

In Victoria, in 2018, the State Government announced \$109 million over four years to respond to the recommendations of the Inquiry into career advice activities in Victorian schools. Similarly, one of the recommendations of the Napthine review (Recommendation 4), is "to build aspiration, improve career advice and strengthen RRR schools to better prepare RRR students for success **by implementing a regionally-based model for independent, professional career advice, and by improving online career related information and advice.**"

Although these programs and recommendations are quite recent, the provision of appropriate career advice remains problematic. According to On Track 2018, the proportion of Year 12 completers and non-completers in Victoria who found career advice 'very useful' has been on a steep decline since 2015⁶. As the Napthine Review recognised, this issue is felt more acutely in regional, rural and remote areas. Similarly, a 2016 study by La Trobe researchers about the adaptation of tertiary admission practices to growth and diversity concluded that students do not understand the tertiary admissions

⁶ Victorian Government. (2018). On Track 2018: Destinations of School Leavers in Victoria. Retrieved from <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/research/pages/ontrack.aspx?Redirect=1>

process, that career advisers are overworked, and that there is limited knowledge of the pathways into the professions⁷.

As noted in the Background Paper to the ongoing review of Senior Secondary Pathways currently being led by Professor Peter Shergold, parents and caregivers continue to be the main source of career advice for students. This is problematic given the lag in parents' education experience and their probable lack of familiarity with developments in the education system and pathways available. This paucity in knowledge is likely to be even more acute for children growing up in remote and complex environments whose parents may have less experience in navigating the Australian education system or the potential financial support systems that are available.

In view of the key role of parents and guardians in their children's career choices, and the continuing widespread dissatisfaction with career information available (particularly in regional, rural and remote Australia), La Trobe recommends supplementing career information practices in schools with a whole-of-community approach to career advice. Such an approach, potentially coordinated at national level, should be designed to increase community aspiration and knowledge to translate into better outcomes for students.

Recommendations

- Adopt a regionally-based model for career advice complemented by a whole-of-community approach to increase community aspiration

4. The need for evidence-based research to underpin RRR policy interventions – the case for a La Trobe Regional Education Research Policy Centre

Australia is home to some of the world's finest universities that consistently rank among the highest in the world. La Trobe submits that the research and teaching expertise in Australia's universities could be put to better use by education policy being better informed by academic research. This is particularly pertinent for regional education where there is insufficient research informing government policy. Surprisingly, since the inception of the Australian Research Council (ARC) in 2011, there have been no ARC-funded projects aimed at understanding the discrepancy between tertiary attainment in capital cities and regional Australia. As the Napthine Review makes clear, attainment at tertiary level requires joined-up programs across the spectrum of education provision from early learning to tertiary education including lifelong learning.

For this reason, La Trobe recommends the establishment of a **regional education policy research centre** as the preferred mechanism for understanding the evidence base to better inform policy design, implementation and evaluation to improve education outcomes for rural, remote and regional Australians across all levels of education including the issues highlighted in this submission. The centre would become a hub of expertise in meeting national policy objectives around regional knowledge and skill building. **Given its regional footprint and foundational commitment to equity objectives, La Trobe is ideally placed to host this policy centre at one of its regional campuses.**

Recommendations

- Provide support for the establishment of an RRR policy centre at one of La Trobe's regional campuses

⁷ Harvey, A., Brett, M., Cardak, B., Sheridan, A., Stratford, J., Tootell, N., McAllister, R. & Spicer, R. (2016). The Adaptation of Tertiary Admissions Practices to Growth and Diversity. Report for the Australian Government Department of Education and Training, Melbourne, Access and Achievement Research Unit, La Trobe University.