Editorial: Aligning AIJRE Research with the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education

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The first issue of AIJRE for 2018 is timely and significant as it coincides with many global initiatives and interest in regional, rural and remote education (RRRE). This issue centres on showing alignment across the globe on common RRRE issues and a call for an alliance of international researchers interested in RRRE.

The collection of articles in this issue align with common global RRRE issues currently surfacing in public and academic contexts. For example, in Australia, Halsey (2018) released the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education (IRRRRE) and the Australian Government's response to the IRRRRE (2018). The commissioned Review was 'part of the Australian Government's commitment to improve the education of country students so they can reach their full potential and participate in Australia's economy'. In Spain, a special edition of the magazine *Guix 443* provided an international gaze on rural education highlighting a diverse range of contributions from around the globe. The authors found that in Burkina Faso, schools deal with terrorism, adverse weather and wild animals; significant differences were identified between Australia's policy documents and state directives; multi-age grouping and socio-economic peripheries were the focus of rural schools in Italy; Argentina's most southern school introduced remote to the discussion; changes and continuities in schools from the north-east of China revealed transition issues; camp schools in Brazil highlighted the importance of building on asset based contexts, such as strengthening agricultural knowledge. It is clear that issues of RRRE are being discussed in a range of public and commercial forums in addition to academics and refereed journals providing leverage and opportunity to the field.

With interest, comes efforts to increase accountability and transparency. Across the globe the obsession with assessment, measurement and evidence-based discourse within education is resulting in policy directives and changes relating to RRR contexts to monitor growth and outcomes. For example, in the UK, 80% of the area is classified as rural and around 20% of population lives in rural areas. The Secretary of State approved the *Designation of Rural Primary Schools Order* (Dec, 2017) which identifies 3807 rural schools as being located in: towns and fringe areas; villages or hamlets; and isolated dwellings. The list is used for the purpose of enacting Section 15 of Education and Inspections Act requiring local authorities to formulate proposals for closure or discontinuance. In the US, 15% of public-school students attend rural schools. However, a report by *The Rural School and Community Trust* (2017) asked 'Where did 'rural go'? because of the seemingly missing 2,672,000 students that were considered rural in 2013-2014 metrics but not in the 2015-2016 measure. Much of the 'de-ruralisation' resulted from suburban sprawl and amalgamation of schools. However, recoding of schools' location may have significant funding implications for individuals and schools in the US.

In late 2017 the OECD's Trends Shaping Education Spotlight 9: Country Roads, Education and Rural Life, presented snapshots on: global trends in rural population; urban/rural skills gap; the rural school; access to early childhood education; ICT and distance education; and teaching in rural areas. These areas are common to most major reports and education reform from the US, UK and more recently Australia, and are what Reid (2017) refers to as "persistent and entrenched locational disadvantaged" within rural areas highlighting that in such contexts "education is both crucially important and inexorably difficult" (p.88). The OECD recommendations called for an exploration of a 'virtuous cycle' to replace typical 'declining cycles' (OECD, 2006) evident within RRR locations.

Australia's alignment with global areas of interest relating to IRRRE was evident in the Government's 'Terms of Reference' and purpose of the 2017 IRRRE Review (Halsey, 2018). The review was commissioned to "consider the key ideas, challenges and barriers that affect the learning outcomes of regional rural and remote students" and "provide recommendations on fresh approaches to support better access and achievement of these students, and their transition to further study, training and employment" (Halsey, 2018, p. 1). The review received 300 submissions from stakeholders in response to the investigation of:

In addition to the *Aims* and *Terms of Reference*, Halsey (2018) included five convictions about the importance of regional, rural and remote communities, learning and ways and means of driving improvements. These could have been shaped as key policy recommendations that kept the focus on community and context rather than addressing predictable challenges:

- vibrant and productive rural communities are integral to Australia's sustainability and prosperity—socially, economically and environmentally
- focusing on ideas and options for re-thinking and reframing education in regional, rural and remote areas is likely to be more productive than simply concentrating on 'the problems'
- student achievements and beyond-school opportunities are shaped by a diverse blend of in-school and community and home factors, as well as interactions between them—context and relationships are always important
- government and departmental/sector policy settings are very significant in developing possibilities for change together with the work of parents and communities
- improvement in education is achieved by exploring how existing resources can be used more effectively, not just by allocating more of them. (p. 1-2)

Whilst Halsey's review revealed neither new nor controversial findings apart from the ever-increasing divide between rural and metropolitan student outcomes, it did catapult regional, rural and remote education into the Australian public policy arena that mirrored results in the UK and US. Its 11 recommendations and 53 actions to progress them provide both starting points and points of reference for future policy decisions, practices and research.

Although this edition of the journal is not an Australian special edition, the submissions are predominately Australian in this volume and align extremely well with Halsey's (2018) 11 Recommendations. In turn, they provide insight into identified global concerns, challenges and issues (OECD Spotlight 9, 2018; Guix, 443; Showalter, Klein, Johnson, 2017; Newcastle University, 2017):

Recommendation 1.   [*]Establish and/or refine processes for ensuring the relevance of the Australian Curriculum and state/territory assessment processes for RRR students and communities.

In the paper, *Equity, Access & Quality Education in Rural Australia,* Downes from Canberra and Fuqua from Melbourne report the results of a survey of the SPERA organization which found that two primary concerns: sustaining access to quality education for all learners and sustaining the survival of rural communities. Relevant to the first recommendation, the authors highlight the importance of addressing retention of teachers, availability of opportunities for different types of learners, the provision of sufficient infrastructure, and post-school options for youth.

Recommendation 2.   *Ensure RRR contexts, challenges and opportunities are explicitly included in the selection and pre-service education of teachers, initial appointment processes and their on-going professional support.

In her paper, *From Acute Dissonance To Authentic Practice: An Intern Teacher's Critical Reflection And Transformative Learning In A Rural Internship,* Jones from UNE explored how graduates learn noting critical reflection and autonomy as significant to transformative learning. Her findings found that authenticity was a more significant source of efficacy than traditional mastery experience, social modelling, social persuasion and psychological responses. She recommends the LEARnT conceptual framework as a tool for critical support of PSTs.

Recommendation 3.   *Ensure RRR contexts, challenges and opportunities are explicitly included in the selection, preparation, appointment and on-going professional support of educational leaders.

Walk Beside Me, Learn Together: A Service-Learning Immersion to a Remote Aboriginal School and Community offers a positive asset based approach to developing two-way learning required when living and working in remote indigenous communities. This article helps to address one obvious omission from Halsey's (2018) recommendations which was explicit reference to remote indigenous schools and communities. The article by Lavery, Cain, and Hampton from the University of Notre Dame, fills an important gap in this regard.

Recommendation 4.   *Ensure RRR children start school with a strong foundation for learning.

Rossiter, Clarke, & Shields' from Charles Sturt University offer an insightful review entitled *Supporting Young People's Emotional Wellbeing During The Transition To Secondary School In Regional Australia.* They found that research specific to student well-being in regional and rural areas of Australia was lacking, particularly for regional and rural settings outside Western Australia and Tasmania. However, their review also offers a comprehensive overview of factors influencing the transition to secondary school from the perspectives of young people, their parents and teachers that may inform development and implementation of interventions specific to the needs of young people in regional and rural communities across Australia.

Recommendation 5.   Expand the availability, affordability and accessibility of high quality work experience placements, VET, dual VET/university options and two-year associate degree programs for RRR students.

In the article, *The Financial Realities For Students From Low SES Backgrounds At Australian Regional Universities*, Devlin and Mackay from Federation University share the findings from a national study in which they identified financial challenges as one of the key barriers to student success at regional universities Their work will help to inform policy makers and educational leaders in their efforts to alleviate students' financial challenges and facilitate their success.

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[*] Denotes alignment with the Australian Government Expert Panel's report Through Growth to Achievement: Report of the Review to Achieve Education Excellence in Australian Schools, chaired by David Gonski.

Recommendation 6.   Support RRR students to make successful transitions from school to university, training, employment and combinations of them.

Veron, Watson & Taggart from Murdoch University, comprehensively explore *University Aspirational Pathways for Metropolitan and Regional Students: Implications for Supporting School-University Outreach Partnerships.* Their findings suggest that 'within the same low-SES region, there is variation in how the culture and neighbourhood factors interact to determine the efficacy of university participation widening programs. Addressing logistic factors that restrict access to university may further reduce the participation gap'.

Recommendation 7.   *Encourage the philanthropic sector to play a greater role in raising achievements and improving opportunities for RRR students.

The article *Third Age Learning In Regional Australia* challenges current focus on raising achievements and improving opportunities of RRR students by focusing on the 'older' student and third age learning. Not only does it discuss engagement of older students, but highlights philanthropic and financial securities afforded many of the elderly within our rural centres.

Recommendation 8.   Improve opportunities for RRR schools to implement entrepreneurship in education through curriculum, teaching, system and cultural changes and building on good practice.

In the article, *Music Education In Remote Rural South Australian Schools: Does A Partnership With A Non-Government Organisation Work?*, Hardwick-Franco, Flinders University explores ways in which schools benefit from partnering with a non-for-profit organisation in music education. Findings suggest that a quality partnership can have a positive impact on student and teacher learning, advancement of pedagogy, and overall well-being. The paper also offers recommendations for how future investigations of school-NGO partnerships can be carried out in the future.

Recommendation 9.   Improve the availability, accessibility and affordability of ICT for RRR schools, teachers, students, parents and communities.

In the paper, *Teaching Old Dogs New Tricks: Health Promotion through Intergenerational Learning in a Regional Men's Shed*, authors Ellis, Hutchings, Beech, Moyle, and Thiele from the University of South Australia present valuable insights regarding the nature and outcomes of intergenerational collaboration and learning as well as the role of intergenerational engagement and enrichment for both younger and older learners.

Recommendation 10.   *Support RRR communities to implement innovative approaches to education delivery designed to improve education access and outcomes for students living in remote communities.

In their article, *New Generation Distributed Learning: Models of Connecting Students Across Distance and Cultural Boundaries* Martin and Broadly from QUT, introduce us to a new generation of distributed learning models developed for a multi-campus university easily adopted for those in RRR contexts.

Recommendation 11.   Establish a national focus for RRR education, training and research to enhance access, outcomes and opportunities in regional Australia.

Downes & Roberts from the University of Canberra remind us of the common issues concerning staffing RRR schools in Australia over the last 15 years. These support Halsey's call for a national focus on RRRR issues and its findings are well positioned to inform future actions. This is particularly significant knowing the powerful influence and importance quality teachers play in preparing RRRR students to access future endeavours, opportunities and outcomes. Their paper *Revisiting the Schoolhouse: A Literature Review on Staffing Rural, Remote and Isolated Schools in Australia 2004-2016,* build a depth of insight into the need to prepare preservice teachers and

leaders for the diverse RRRR contexts in ways significantly different to those employed in previous attempts.

The Government's response supported the 11 recommendations and actions and outlined that many of the actions 'may cut across exiting initiatives, work plans, funding arrangements and levels of government' and that the recommendations 'vary in their applicability to a whole of government approach' (p.6). The Government committed to only taking the recommendations into conversations with states and territories. In the first instance it was taken to the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) with Gonski's report. The Government response to the IRRRRE addressed the four priority areas in Halsey's final report:

1. establishing a national focus for regional, rural and remote education
2. enhancing leadership, teaching, curriculum and assessment
3. improving information and communications technology (ICT)
4. ensuring transitions into and out of school.

Although new reform is on its way, much of the attention within the response centres on the government's *Quality Schools* package and focus on 'students'. Although students are 'firmly at the heart of this Government's vision for education from high chair to higher education' and continuous schooling if public policy does not address a 'whole of community' approach to RRRR education the educational gap may continue to widen between RRRR and metro counterparts.

This edition of the journal is significant and timely as it coincides with noteworthy national policy reviews around the globe and in particular in Australia. Both aim to improve the education of country students so they can reach their full potential and participate in Australia's economy but the solutions require creativity and contextualisation. Rural policymaking must be 'crosscutting, embracing the range of policy influences that impinge upon specific rural areas. It is also necessary to ensure all policies are properly 'rural proofed' (Centre for Rural Economy, Newcastle University, UK, p. 4).

What has gone unnoticed, and what we consider the highlight of Halsey's report, are his five convictions he used to align with the Reviews 'terms of reference', this asset based contextualization of RRRR Education in many ways underpins creative future directions and endeavours, as it disrupts traditional deficit lens and discourses used to investigate RRRR contexts, issues and strengths and foregrounds the importance of RRR settings to the Australian economy. This asset based approach, similar to the OECDs virtuous cycle (2017) and Downes & Philips (2018) call for innovative solutions provides a springboard for creative alternatives to traditional RRR challenges and issues impacting the students and communities living and working in regional, rural and remote locations around the world. The editors herald a call for a global alliance of rural educators and education to address the commonalities that exist within the extant literature in the field.

Finally, the Australian International Journal of Rural Education (AIJRE) is pleased to announce an exciting new section of special reviewed articles for publication that are of high quality and directly related to the practice of teaching and educational initiatives in schools and communities. As with all articles submitted to our journal, papers need to be based around rural education. This section of the journal allows for those with strong understandings of rural contexts to submit short articles, reports, conference reports, professional learning reflections or book reviews (detailed guidelines are provided https://journal.spera.asn.au/index.php/AIJRE). This is a great opportunity to share what's happening in your community and contribute to a leading rural education journal.

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