



# Australian and International Journal of Rural Education

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**Fiona Nash**

*Regional Education Commissioner*

### Introduction and Acknowledgements

Can I firstly just acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land on which we meet and pay my respects to Elders past, present and emerging and extend my respect to any First Nations people in the room here with us today.

I want to acknowledge all of you for being here. I particularly want to acknowledge the team from the Department of Education. I am very fortunate in my role to be able to work with some wonderful people in the Department of Education. It is just terrific to be here with the team today.

Good morning and what a wonderful couple of days are coming up. And from my perspective as Regional Education Commissioner it is really important that these types of events can happen, particularly as regional people and organisations are not very good at blowing their own trumpet. Regional people tend to just get on and do something and once they have done something fantastic, they just think ‘it’s done’ and not tell anybody about it. But we really need to tell the story because so many of the decision makers and the people that are making those policies and setting ideas for regional Australia don’t actually come from regional Australia, so we need to make sure that they hear.

I was delighted at the end of last year, there was a recommendation from the Review done by Dennis Napthine to put a Regional Education Commissioner in place<sup>1</sup>. I was very privileged and humbled when I was placed in the role. The role is very much to finally have an individual in that role of Commissioner that could put a national focus on rural and regional and remote education.

From the end of last year, it’s been a pretty hectic time. It has been a completely new role, it was starting from scratch. In the first six months I really focused on meeting with stakeholders. It was so important to me—even though I have a background in the regions—it was important to me to make sure that what I was seeing as the challenges, and what I thought were those challenges out there in the regions, was actually the case. I think it’s well over 200 stakeholders, individuals and groups that I have met and what it has done is given me a tremendous picture of what the priorities are. It’s like a jigsaw puzzle, all these pieces, we put them together and you get this clarity around the picture of what’s needed. My role—while it came as a recommendation from the Napthine Review—encompasses the whole education journey for children from early

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<sup>1</sup> The Napthine Report, <https://www.education.gov.au/download/4663/national-regional-rural-and-remote-tertiary-education-strategy-final-report/6981/document/pdf/en> builds on the recommendations for a commissioner of Rural Education presented in Halsey’s *Independent Review of Rural, Regional and Remote Education*, <https://www.education.gov.au/download/4132/independent-review-regional-rural-and-remote-education-final-report/6116/document/pdf/en>

childhood through to schools, to vocational education and training to higher education and universities, so there's a whole thread through. And I also have an eye to the regional workforce because I don't think you can look at all those things and not take the regional workforce into account as well and the importance of that. My vision is pretty simple really, that anybody within rural and regional and remote Australia, no matter where they live, can have access to the education opportunities they need to reach their full potential whatever that potential might be for them. I do want to touch on the importance of rural and regional, and remote Australia in general because I don't think we do it any were near enough, the more we do it I think the more decision makers will take note of the importance of rural and regional and remote Australia as a whole. Around a third of the population lives outside the metropolitan cities, the rural and regional and remote areas provide two-thirds of Australia's export income—not to discount the importance of the social fabric of regional Australia. I have yet to come across anybody in any government who says we want people to move people from regional Australia into the metro cities because we need the balance in the social fabric. That's why it is so important that the opportunities are there, particularly in education, for people in rural and regional and remote areas.

### **Aspiration, Access and Attainment**

Aspiration, access, and attainment are words we use a lot in relation to regional education. They are words but it's about people—about those people living in the rural regional and remote areas that need access to that education. What I find is so interesting when you look at aspiration particularly, is that so many people—and it's not just young people, its people right across our regions—say somebody has it but they are not really aspiring, they don't really have any aspiration. That is true in a lot of cases, but what is also true is that many of our young people have the aspiration but don't have the self-belief to do something. They don't feel they are good enough to be able to go on to VET or be able to go on to tertiary education, and in some instances not being able to go to Year 12 because they just don't believe they can. There is a real responsibility for community to be at the centre. Our regional communities play a role in looking at what they can do to encourage and inspire young people to look to the future, to see what they can do and to back themselves in to be able to do that. There are all sorts of barriers we see with aspiration, access, and attainment. We aren't looking at it like 'do they want to go somewhere?; access, 'can they get there?'; attainment, 'how will they go when they finally get there?' But the barriers around cost, tyranny of distance, don't sit with people in metropolitan areas. I remember many years ago I was really coming up against the barrier of cost for regional people and it was particularly to do with universities at that point, and I will never forget this—it nearly made me cry—I was talking with a young student from out western New South Wales, and he said 'Fiona, I really want to go to university but I haven't told mum and dad because I know they can't afford it'.

I just thought there is such a responsibility for this nation to make sure that those young people don't ever have to say that; that they don't ever have to think 'I can't even tell my parents I want to go to university'. Again, back to the community, that ability to wrap ourselves around those young people as communities—and we do it so well in regional communities—that's the one thing we do particularly better than metropolitan areas, and it's that sense of community. The ability to be able to use that strength and power, a sense of community, to improve the outcomes of lives, of people in those communities. Access is more difficult for people in rural and regional areas and given the ability to get to school—it brought home to me already, what so many remote families are doing to educate their children because they simply don't have access to a school. It's just not there. And what they do, these families at home, at the same time those regions are making a massive contribution to the nation's economy. This is really important and

it's these sorts of stories right across the country that are feeding into the incredible jigsaw that I am managing to put together to get a very clear picture.

With attainment, I think it's very much an issue of pressure for so many of our young people. If you look at say a university degree, they have got the issue of cost, of actually getting to university, the cost while they are there, the cost of doing a placement, they might have a casual job somewhere that they have given up to go on paid placement for a particular course, and all of those things when you look at it comparatively as a uni student, when you can go home every day when mum is doing the washing and dad is doing the cooking or vice versa, or they are both doing everything in this day and age, but it is so much easier and there isn't that pressure and the social dislocation of having to leave home and be away that can really put pressure on that attainment. Interestingly Year 12 completion rates are much worse in the regions than they are in the cities. It's around 79% in the cities, those students who go through and complete Year 12, it's around 70% in inner regional, 72% in outer regional, and only about 65% out in remote areas. So, even just finishing year 12 and attaining that year 12 certificate is a challenge for many of our young people.

### Challenges

There are so many comparators between rural and regional that are worse than they are in the city, and I will run through a few of the challenges, but what I want to do this morning is focus on what the solutions are, how to make things better. We are all aware of the challenges that sit out there but it's still very important that we look at things like 'one size fits all policy' doesn't work. It doesn't work for metropolitan versus rural and regional and remote Australia, and it doesn't work between regional, rural and remote, because they are all so very different. When we are looking at decision makers and again looking at policy for regional and remote Australia, it's really important we keep making the point that we have to have flexibility and you can't put something in the metro and plonk it over the regions and think it's going to work, 'cause it's just not. Those challenges we are seeing, it's not just about aspiration, access, and attainment, we are talking about regional outcomes—it's around those issues of cost and distance, and time and place and the social dislocation and all those things.

Governments, I believe, have a social responsibility to make sure there is the provision of good education right across regional Australia. The form that takes might differ from place to place, but it is absolutely a responsibility of government, it is a social good. I was very interested to read Minister Jason Clare (Minister for Education) in his maiden speech, he said your post code shouldn't determine your educational opportunities. And that is so true, and I was really encouraged to read that, and also to listen as many of you would be aware that he has made a lot of comments around the importance of equity and boy do those things fit with our regional people—absolutely. The issue of making sure you have equity, that we have decision makers who are really focussed on rural regional and remote Australia is really important but, we have to tell the story, we have to tell it collectively, we have to tell it together.

There are a whole range of challenges across the sector—I'm not going into them in great detail—when we look at schools, we have issues around getting enough teachers in our schools, we have issues around having enough support services for students, we have issues around even being able to access school depending on where you live, we have issues - you might not think about very much—even about subject availability in senior schools in regional areas, that pathway through to VET or higher ed, and that's really important that we focus on those things because otherwise they are starting behind, and why should they have any less opportunity than somebody sitting in a city school. Why should they have any less? Particularly, in this day-and-age when we have so much more flexibility with delivery, we can do things online. It's not always optimum, but my goodness it's a whole lot better than nothing. Covid has really taught us that

we can do things differently and the sky doesn't fall in. That, I think gives a lot of courage and ability to be able to plan for the future in a flexible way and so do things differently.

Around VET we have of course issues with access to courses that people want within reasonable proximity, without having to travel. Around higher ed we have the issues I mentioned before, just the mere fact that students have no choice. No choice but to leave home and relocate to go and do a university degree. Less than half of the people in rural and regional and remote areas are likely to get a degree by the age of 35 than people in the cities, and that's not good enough. Degrees aren't the be all and end all. There is a whole range of different opportunities in education across the regions, but it is just one example, and they are far less likely to complete their degree. Those sorts of things, we need to make sure that those outcomes are improved. If it was simple, we wouldn't be sitting here having this conversation, if it was easy, it would already have been done by now. There is no silver bullet, but what it is going to take is a lot of collective will, to keep the focus on the challenges and at the same time provide the solutions.

### **Solutions**

Those solutions are many and I really see them often as I am travelling around, they are out there in the communities. You all know your various sectors, your communities better than anybody else. Why wouldn't decision makers go to you for solutions to the challenges? I don't think there is anybody that doesn't want to improve the outcomes. How we get there is going to be so important. I think that ability to recognise those challenges that are there and the decision makers and have a collective view from the community and from government to industry to look at what can be done to make it better. One of the key things, and I have said this for a very long time, is to be positive and talk up rural and regional and remote Australia. It's a fantastic place to live. You can't be anywhere better in this country than to live in a regional community in my opinion. So often the media will say 'this is doom and gloom and it's all terrible'. You never see the front page of the paper say, 'fantastic outcomes happening in Gawler the other day'. Wasn't this an amazing positive story, which is why we have to work doubly hard to get the good stories out there because media isn't as keen to put a good story in the news as they are about ones that might grab more of a headline. Even as people in our communities we have a real responsibility to talk ourselves up to make sure that people recognise all of the great things that happen in those communities.

The focus for the conference about community being the centre of everything is really aligned to one of the key things I have been thinking about and working on. In terms of improving access, aspiration, and attainment, in terms of improving education outcomes in the regions, we often talk about attracting people to the regions, whether it's from cities or other regions or international. We often talk about retaining people out in regional areas, and that's absolutely good, but what I don't think we talk enough about is the home grown, how we home grow the strengthening of our communities through not only young people coming through our education systems but people in those communities at any age who might be looking to further their education. And as I look around the country there are some good examples, but it's pretty ad hoc, so for me it's about how do we better link at a regional level, how do we better link industry back into education pathways and from a really early age. There is no point in giving advice to year 11 and 12 people about 'this might be your opportunity', they should be thinking about it when they are this high [much younger], that's when they need to know what their opportunities are because they can't be what they can't see. And they need to have that connectivity into industry in the community people to be able to go 'this is what my future pathway might look like'. They might be 7, 8, 9, 10, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16 it doesn't matter but they can see it and they can see opportunities that hopefully they can see a lot of different opportunities that they can make a choice about. By bringing Industry more closely in at a regional level to the schools, to the universities, the RUCs, the councils, to the work with community groups, to be able to strengthen

the opportunities for those students in those communities though, that is something that needs some very serious consideration. Because it's about people; people connecting people, and in my mind, I can see the ability for this to work because communities know the people in their communities and the strength from that I think will be quite extraordinary. It will be something I will be continuing to pursue as commissioner.

The other thing I don't think we talk enough about as one of the solutions, is the pathway home. A lot of you people do choose to move away because they do want to move away for a while, they might go to university somewhere else and do something else—it should be all about choice—but what we are not doing well enough is keeping them connected to their community that they leave. And if they have a pathway home, they stay connected. I remember going to a tiny community in Victoria many years ago, cutting a long story short, three couples there in their thirties, had all gone to Melbourne, they had all come home and they had stayed connected by playing sport at home every now and again, they would go play netball and they had this because they wanted to stay connected to their community. So, I think how we create the pathway home around rural, regional and remote students who leave, will be a very important thing.

### **Decision Makers**

Keeping rural regional and remote Australia in the forefront of the minds of decision makers is absolutely vital, and we are really fortunate to have people in departments who listen, who actually understand how important it is that rural, regional and remote policy deliberation is a priority. It's up to us to make sure the decision makers know that, because those programs and that funding is so important. Money doesn't fix anything, but what you do with money does. Just simply getting a bucket of dollars won't do anything, but how those dollars are used and how those dollars are implemented will make such a difference and it says to those rural and regional and remote communities 'we think you are worth investing in'. What that does to the confidence in those communities, is really quite extraordinary.

### **Regional, Rural and Remote Education Workforce**

Finally, I think the importance of the people that work here in the education sector—all of you in this room and people out there in our rural and regional and remote communities who are every day working to make things better for regional education, be it a university, be it a Regional University Centre (RUC) be it an industry group on the ground, whatever it is—the focus is to try and make it better and we really have to value that. It is so important that we do, because we need people like you out on the ground doing the job that we can do to make things better, it is as simple as that. I really commend all of you for what you're doing and what you have done.

### **Conclusions**

A couple of little stories to finish on. Change is driven by people and people in regional, rural and remote Australia are extraordinary. Just one story. It's actually the RUC story, which I think is amazing. What is it now? 2700 students at RUCs. I can remember standing in the street in Cooma with Duncan Taylor when the Cooma Regional Study Hub was an idea. It was nothing more than an idea. And look at it now. It was an idea that someone in a regional community went 'I know this will work' so we have to keep backing ourselves when we have ideas. We don't always get things right. So many times, I put my hand up to say 'I don't know what to do about this' but I know somebody who will and that is really valuable, being able to test ideas—and there is never a stupid idea—and there is never any failure in not succeeding. There is only failure in not trying in the first place. It's about having a red-hot crack. I just want to finish with a story. I'm a bit of a golf nut. I play so badly. But I watch a lot of golf. There is a young fellow at the moment called Tom Kim who has just started on the PGA tour in the States, and he is 20 years old, and he has

already won twice, the first person to win twice since Tiger Woods. Actually, he is only the second person to win twice before 21. The point I want to make is that the interviewer was talking to one of his high-flying colleagues and said, 'why is Tom doing so well?' This guy is so positive, unbelievably positive, upbeat, he is positive all the time, this fellow said, 'Tom has got no scar tissue'. There was nothing holding him back because he was so young and he could just be positive and it just made me think as people in rural and regional and remote Australia who are trying to make things better in education we just have to be positive, don't think about blaming, don't think about things we can't do, don't think about the challenges that are there, just turn up every day and be positive. Put every idea forward you think is going to make a difference because at the end of every single day and the beginning of every day when you go to work, you are making people's lives in rural, regional and remote Australia better. That is a fantastic thing. Thank you very much for having me here this morning and I am delighted to officially open the Conference.