Responding to Remote, Rural and Regional Tertiary Education Needs: A Conversation Between the Australian Regional Education Commissioner and the Scottish Commissioner for Fair Access

John H McKendrick
Commissioner for Fair Access, Scotland, UK
jmke@gcu.ac.uk

Fiona Nash
Regional Education Commissioner
RECSecretariat@education.gov.au

John Guenther
Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education
john.guenther@batchelor.edu.au

Laurence Lasselle
University of St Andrews, UK
laurence.lasselle@st-andrews.ac.uk

Melyssa Fuqua
University of Melbourne
melyssa.fuqua@unimelb.edu.au

Carmel Hall
Regional Education Commissioner Policy Secretariat
carmel.hall@education.gov.au

Abstract

Access to tertiary education remains a significant concern for many remote, regional and rural communities. This topic has been explored in the *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education* since its creation. In February 2024, the Journal went one step further by facilitating a conversation between two policy leaders whose remits include fair access to tertiary education, Ms Fiona Nash, the Australian Regional Education Commissioner and Professor John McKendrick, the Scottish Commissioner for Fair Access. They candidly discussed the importance of responding to tertiary education needs of regional, rural and remote communities from their perspectives. They reviewed a range of complex and compounding issues for remote, regional and rural students in accessing tertiary education in both countries, elaborated on their respective policy contexts.

Keywords: *rural, regional, remote, fair access to tertiary education, equity, widening access*

Introduction

On 27 February 2024, the *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education* hosted an online conversation between the Australian Regional Education Commissioner, Fiona Nash, and the Scottish Commissioner for Fair Access, John McKendrick.

Ms Nash is the first Regional Education Commissioner in Australia. She was appointed in December 2021. Her role sees her as advocating for the educational needs of regional people, from early childhood education, primary and secondary school to tertiary education, and provides a national focus on regional, rural and remote education and training outcomes.

Professor McKendrick is the second Scottish Commissioner for Fair Access. He was appointed by the Scottish government in January 2023. The Commissioner's role acts as a focus for efforts by colleges and universities to promote fair access, working closely with the Scottish Government,

the Scottish Funding Council, Universities Scotland, Colleges Scotland, National Union of Students in Scotland, University and College Union, and many other stakeholders.

The Journal facilitated the conversation between both Commissioners. We wanted to hear about the importance to respond to regional, rural and remote needs in terms of tertiary education from their perspectives. We asked the Regional Education Commissioner (REC) to elaborate on the main challenges and opportunities following the implementation of the National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy (Napthine et al., 2019), and from a further education perspective speak about the implications of the Australian Universities Accord (O'Kane et al., 2024) process for regional education. We invited the Commissioner for Fair Access (CfFA) to talk about the debate around targets, learners and universities' location, and fair access in Scotland. We also wanted to hear any advice or lessons that could be learned from each Commissioner's experience and policy context.

The conversation was convened by our Chief Editor, John Guenther. Two of our Associate Editors, Melyssa Fuqua and Laurence Lasselle, and the Program and Policy Officer at the Regional Education Commissioner Policy Secretariat, Carmel Hall, were in attendance (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: *Conversation Between both Commissioners Hosted Online by the Australian and International Journal of Rural Education on 27 February 2024*

Note:
Top row from left to right: Ms Fiona Nash, Dr John Guenther, Dr Laurence Lasselle
Second row from left to right: Ms Carmel Hall, Professor John McKendrick, Dr Melyssa Fuqua

Conversation

Chief Editor: The first question goes to the Regional Education Commissioner (REC) for Australia, Fiona Nash, and the question is, is equitable access an issue for regional, rural and remote students in Australia?

REC: Yes, it's a huge issue in a whole lot of ways. When we look at the comparison between rural, regional and remote students and metropolitan students, it's really quite stark in many areas. Interestingly, it's even different between rural and regional and remote, but that's probably a discussion for another day.

None of this will be any surprise. It's very much around distance and the tyranny of distance. Metropolitan students are either living at home or very near a tertiary education institution. Regional (and I'll use the term regional to mean rural, regional, and remote) students often have massive distances to actually leave home and attend tertiary education, be it virtually, be it university or be it vocational education and training (VET). They often have absolutely no choice but to move away from home to go off to attend tertiary education.

It's the costs as well. If a regional student has no choice but to leave home to physically attend university, it's around $30,000 AUD a year. A metropolitan student doesn't have that cost. That's a real inequity and regardless of the circumstances of parents or whether parents might be supporting those students, the inequity is the comparator with the metropolitan students.

It is challenging even for students who are studying online. Connectivity and the standard and the level of internet can be very different between regional students and city students. It is very different to connectivity that we're seeing in the cities.

Chief Editor: Thank you very much and let us turn to the Scottish Commission for Fair Access (CfFA), John McKendrick. Why has Scotland implemented a Fair Access to Higher Education policy?

CfFA: I think that is a deceptively simple question. It's also a question that I can't answer with insider knowledge because I wasn't involved as Commissioner when the strategy for fair access was introduced in 2016.[1] With the benefit of hindsight, I think it represents a moment in time when the interests of universities[2] and government aligned around this particular issue.

There was some politics to the decision—an opportunity, if not an imperative. In the aftermath of a referendum defeat on Scottish independence in September 2014, Scotland had elected a new First Minister to lead the Scottish National Party and Scottish government.[3] Under Nicola Sturgeon's early leadership, the pursuit of socially progressive policies was strengthened. Her administration's first Programme for Government (2014/15), included the ambition that a child born at that time in one of Scotland's most deprived communities should, by the time of leaving school, have the same chance of going to university as one born in one of the country's least deprived areas: a Commission on Widening Access was established to advise Ministers on how to achieve this ambition. By the time the Commission reported in 2016 (Commission of Widening Access, 2016),[4] the Scottish National Party had strengthened its grip on power. The election of an overwhelming majority of Scottish National Party Members of Parliament to the United Kingdom Parliament in the 2015 general election, was replicated in 2016 when the Scottish National Party also secured a majority in the election to the Scottish Parliament.[5] This was unexpected as the Scottish Parliament was not designed for majority control: the Scottish political system was designed to be collaborative. So, by 2016, we had a party that was invigorated and a government that wanted to position itself very differently to what was going on in the rest of the United Kingdom, where an austerity agenda was being pursued that was rolling back on social provision and social protection. At roughly the same time as the widening access agenda was being conceived, the Scottish Government also introduced a child poverty

---

[1] Note from Journal: The strategy was introduced in 2016 and the First Commissioner for Fair Access was Professor Sir Peter Scott.

[2] There are 19 higher education institutions in Scotland, some of which are specialist institutions such as The Conservatoire of Scotland, Glasgow School of Art and Scotland's Rural College. Throughout, the shorthand 'universities' is used to refer to all these higher education institutions.

[3] Nicola Sturgeon was elected unopposed as leader of the Scottish National Party on the 14th of November 2014 and installed as First Minister of Scotland by the Scottish Parliament on the 20th of November 2014.

[4] https://www.gov.scot/publications/blueprint-fairness-final-report-commission-widening-access/

[5] The Scottish National Party had led as a minority government between May 2011 and May 2016.

strategy, and a strategy in schools to narrow the poverty-related attainment gap. I think the fair access to universities agenda was the logical extension of that work. So, there was a political moment when everything was in place to pursue fair access.

But I think it's too simple to reduce it to merely a matter of politics. There was already a long-standing commitment in the higher education sector in Scotland to practise widening access. Back in 2013, Universities Scotland published a report that celebrated the breadth of work that was being pursued across universities to widen access.[6] Leaders in Scottish higher education were already committed to this agenda, and seemed very comfortable with progressing it further.

Each of these separate factors—political drive, long standing commitment in higher education, a set of leaders who believed in it—are supportive of work to widen access. But I think these three factors coming together at the same time meant that this became a central focus for higher education in Scotland.

Chief Editor: Could I just follow with a context question, John, around what are the fair access parameters—here we talk about equity issues and 'rural, regional and remote' is one of those— just very briefly what are those parameters that you're working with?

CfFA: And it's a critical question, John. I think there are two very different ways of answering this question. There is one that focuses on the headline target and there is another that focuses on the broader range of activity that sits behind that.

So, to the narrow focus on the target. We have a very specific metric that we use to measure fair access in Scotland. The definition that we work toward is that by 2030—as the agenda started in 2016, this represents a generational change—20% of Scottish based students entering into full time education will be from Scotland's 20% most deprived areas. This metric has a socioeconomic focus. It uses an area-based measure which is very interesting in the context of the discussion that we're having today as rural and remote are not explicit considerations. The tool that is used to identify deprived areas in Scotland, also under-represents deprivation in rural and remote Scotland.

I view the target as a means to end. Although the target is focused on one dimension, it leads to progress on many more fronts: inadvertently, as a by-product of the focus on socioeconomic status, a broader range of marginalised populations are now accessing higher education. Furthermore, the target opens up wider debate: those drawing their intake from rural and remote Scotland now argue that there is a need to be sensitive to rural and remote realities (which the target is not).

I think that the headline target has been useful in these early stages of promoting fair access. However, I think that we are fast approaching the point at which there is a need for a more granular analysis that acknowledges the broader range of imbalances in higher education— including rural and remote access—and then tailors interventions to tackle these. But what we have just now is a very clear focus that is attractive and easy to understand. It's about tackling socioeconomic injustice and we happen to use an area-based metric to measure progress.

Chief Editor: Thank you for that, John. To you Fiona—and this is an incredibly topical sort of question in the context of Australia today, given that we've just had a report released about the

---

[6] https://www.universities-scotland.ac.uk/publications/access-all-areas-2013/

university access just yesterday.[7] Can you tell me how do you explain the low progression from secondary education to higher education for Australian regional, rural and remote learners?

REC: This is such a good question and there are so many different things that affect progression, or tertiary education participation and attainment for regional students. What it is for one student might be different to another. Collectively, I think there's a list of reasons for the low progression.

The first one we talk about is young people in the regions not having a lot of aspiration and often that's true. But what I find occurs even more than the lack of aspiration is a lack of self-belief. These young people don't believe that they can go on to university or go on to VET, that they're not good enough. No one in their families has ever done it. They wouldn't know what to do. How would they possibly afford it? They might not know how a university works. Often, they'll have the aspiration and think "I'd love to be an engineer", but there are numerous barriers that sit in the way and they just don't have the self-belief. I think it's a real amalgam of aspiration, self-belief, and factors in their individual circumstances.

A lot of this aligns with some of John's (CfFA) work in low socio-economic status, but many regional students (or a good percentage of them) in going on to university are going to be first in their families to do so. That's really challenging for a young person who's out in the regions and does not necessarily have any sort of support around them and their own family has no experience in doing it. So, there's no family support, guidance, direction of what to do to go on to university. Not having had family members being involved in tertiary education is a real barrier for young people.

I love the phrase "*you can't be what you can't see*".[8] If young people in the regions don't know an opportunity is there, how do they take it? Again, there's this real blocker to pursuing tertiary education. If a regional student doesn't know that there's an option to be an engineer; if they don't know that there's an option to complete a vocational education and training qualification and have a trade; if they don't know there are all these opportunities, then they simply can't take them.

The issue of careers advice goes partly to the lack of progression as well, and I don't think we're starting careers advice early enough in regional areas. If regional students are not getting good careers advice about how to think about what their future path might be, what the opportunities might be, then how do they get themselves down that road? Careers advice is very ad hoc in Australia. It's done on a state-by-state basis and even within the states, there's no standard of best practice across careers advice. That's really problematic. At the moment, the low progression is partly due to the fact that regional areas have got a really strong labour market that acts as a barrier. We've got young people out in the regions that are deciding between a job opportunity that pays extremely well or an opportunity to go into tertiary education, which is actually pretty scary and they feel like they don't know how it works.

There are always financial constraints looking at the affordability for young people to be able to go into tertiary education.[9] There is also a lack of confidence and often an unwillingness—which is really understandable—to move away from family and from social networks, that's really quite

---

[7] The conversation took place just after the release of the Australian Universities Accord report on 25 February 2024.

[8] Note from the Journal: this is a quote widely used to express the importance of being able to see a future career when making decisions about pathway options for tertiary education. See for example (Kinnane et al., 2014)

[9] 28.4% of Australian regional and remote undergraduate students who seriously considered leaving their degree early cited financial difficulties as the reason, compared to 20.2% of metro students (see Figure 17 in O'Kane et al. (2024, p. 142).

scary for young people, particularly if they're just out of school in a rural and regional area and they haven't been away from their communities very much.

And even curriculum for regional students who are in regional schools, often at secondary school level, they don't have access to the subjects they actually need to do as a prerequisite for the courses that they want to go on to do and often they don't realize that until they get to the end of year 12. Many schools are coming up with creative ways to extend access to subjects and resources, but poor access to the specialist teachers and facilities needed for particular subjects can be a real problem as well.

This indicates that there is a range of complex and compounding issues for regional students.

Chief Editor: Thank you, Fiona. John, this next one I guess follows on from the focus on regional students. I want to ask what are the issues that isolated students in Scotland face in accessing higher education compared to their metropolitan counterparts? And is rurality an issue in Scotland? You might just start just by providing us a little bit of a mental picture of what 'isolated' looks like in Scotland.

CfFA: So much of what Fiona said is pertinent to Scotland too, and I'm glad you asked me to clarify the nature of rurality or rural or isolation in Scotland because, it's very different. Australia is a large continent: Scotland is a very small country. What we consider remote and rural might seem less so to Australians. But, tackling rural and remote injustice matters to us.

Fiona made the point about access to opportunities in school education; that's also an issue in Scotland. In the very large metropolitan [secondary] schools, some of which have as many as 2,000 pupils, there is tremendous subject choice, particularly in areas that have a social economic demographic that is more affluent and with pupils who have traditionally been more successful in education. There are more options offered in these schools because more pupils stay on in school to the later years. So, there's an issue about restricted subject choice which, means that some pupils—particularly those in remote and rural areas—may not have equal opportunity to pick subjects that enable their talent to flourish.

There is also the issue of the widening access work in schools, which facilitate access to higher education. While universities deliver work in rural and remote schools to widen access, there is much less activity and opportunity to do so compared to metropolitan locations. For example, three of Glasgow's universities have longitudinal projects which work with some primary schools, maintaining contact and support for their pupils as they progress into and through secondary schooling. Pupils in those schools get to experience university over a number of years. That opportunity is not available to schools in more rural and remote locations. We might have stellar examples of widening access work, but opportunity is not equally accessible to all.

And then there's the thorny issue of the fact that we use the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD), which is an area-based metric, to measure progress. I believe that the metric has some merit, but it works against rural areas in general, and isolated remote areas in particular. It doesn't tend to identify deprivation in rural areas because the SIMD seeks to identify concentrations of deprivation, whereas deprivation in rural areas is more dispersed. Everybody understands this. It is not the purpose of the SIMD metric to identify household (let alone individual) deprivation. There are far fewer areas in rural, remote, and island parts of Scotland that are classified as being deprived areas. And this is most stark in our two most remote island communities—Orkney Islands and Shetland Islands. In both, according to the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation, there are no areas of deprivation. Now, we have statistics that measure poverty at the level of the individual (such as access to free school meals) and household level (such as local area estimates of income poverty for households). We know there are families in these islands that are deprived, but they don't show up in the SIMD metric of area-based

deprivation. So, pupils in these islands are not targeted by universities in order to meet the national target to achieve fair access.

So that's three ways in which rural and remote areas are disadvantaged by the way the fair access agenda has been conceived.

But it's not all bad news. And I think we need to acknowledge that. We have in Scotland, for example, the University of Highlands and Islands, and Scotland's Rural College. Both institutions have a strong rural presence. The University of Highlands and Islands in particular, is a campus-based institution which has many colleges dispersed throughout rural Scotland. These institutions provide local opportunities to pursue higher education in the most rural and remote parts of Scotland (including the islands that I referred to).

Individual institutions are also sensitive to rural circumstance. Rural equity is an issue that taxes many institutions, including those based in our largest cities. For example, universities in the city of Aberdeen draw many of their students from a rural hinterland. It is very difficult for the two universities in this city[10] to meet their targets because their host population is largely drawn from a rural area beyond the city—there are fewer deprived areas in their midst. And even in Glasgow, the city with the highest concentration of area deprivation in Scotland, one of its universities has become acutely aware that there are island communities in the farthest flung parts of its catchment area that are not being fairly served by the way in which it acknowledges and accounts for circumstances that hinder progression to university. It is now exploring whether it can change entry requirements (known as contextualised admissions) to take account of these barriers to access.

And I think we should also acknowledge that access to higher education in Scotland is not just about direct entry to university from secondary school. University can be accessed through colleges (Further Education Institutions). Many students who go on to graduate with a university degree complete one or two years of higher education study in a college, before transferring into university at a later stage to complete their degree. Colleges have a stronger local presence compared to universities in rural Scotland, which increases access to higher education. Increasingly, there is more complexity and diversity on how we do higher education—some aspects of which facilitate access from remote and rural Scotland.

So, although there are in-built system disadvantages, there are also several actions that have been introduced to try to promote equity of access for rural and remote students.

Chief Editor: You have got me thinking on that one. Fiona, to you now, in broad terms, what do you think needs to change to make higher education more accessible for regional, rural and remote students?

REC: John, I think there's a number of things from a high level to the really specific. High level is really around decision makers, governments making sure that when they're looking at education—they don't do one size fits all policy that sits across metro and across regional areas because it just doesn't work.

You can't transpose a policy that's designed for the city, put it out in rural areas and expect it to have a good outcome because it just won't. So, I think getting decision makers to be more thoughtful around the differences between city and country is really important.

---

[10] The University of Aberdeen and Robert Gordon University.

Really a lot of it, it's the flip side of the challenges I outlined earlier. Making sure that students in regional areas are really aware of the opportunities that are there for them, of the things that they can do, so that they can be what they can see.

There's also quite a role for local community, local government at a community level providing the experiences to create that side of opportunities by bringing business and industry together with education, be it the university, if it is there, or secondary, primary, community groups at a community level to all talk about what actually is the opportunity.

And I think one of the things we've really not focused on enough in regional areas over time is this. We talk a lot about attracting people to rural and regional and remote areas. We talk a lot about retaining people, but I don't think we talk enough about home-growing the workforce. What are the opportunities for people who actually want to stay locally in their local community to connect through the business and industry, to have sight of what those opportunities are and what might be available to them? So, I think that's a real amalgam of things in there. The support is really critical. We need to do that better. If we're going to have higher education, tertiary education, more accessible, then students have got to have more support as they're going through school to think about what those future paths might be. And then how to navigate it? Support on how to navigate it to get from being a school student to being a tertiary education student. It's a really big deal and it's really challenging. It is so important that once they get into tertiary education, they have the support at that point so that they have the ability to successfully complete their studies.

And we know that so many of our regional students drop out of tertiary education simply because they don't have enough support as they're going through as they're learning. Compounding this, we have a real cost of living issue in this country at the moment, John, and for students, particularly regional students, that compounds a lot of the challenges of actually being at university or in vocational education and training.

And I think this one is pretty obvious, you know, better funding for students to relocate, better funding for students to support them when they are actually undertaking tertiary education. Easy to say, hard to do. There is no bucket of money sitting under Parliament House that politicians can just stick their hand into, unfortunately. That is a real issue, providing the appropriate funding going back really to what I said at the beginning about that relative inequity of the cost that sits with rural and regional remote students that simply don't sit with their metropolitan counterparts. So, I think things like that would be a big start.

Chief Editor: Thank you. John, this one is a little different. What has surprised you in your first year as Commissioner for Fair Access?

CfFA: This answer could be a long one, John! One thing that surprised me was how much I didn't know. I have worked in Scottish higher education for 25 years, but I have learned so many things in the past year, not just nationally but also even within my own institution and about my own practice as a university lecturer. For example, I never knew the data that was routinely available in my own institution to examine and scrutinise these issues. As a busy academic (I'm still an active researcher and lecturer), you get on with the business of teaching, you get on with the business of research, and you don't tend to have capacity or inclination to do much more than that. My work as Commissioner began to open my eyes to a different way of looking at my

practice and my sector. These are things that I should have known given my research work examining poverty in Scotland.[11]

I was struck with how many people were involved in facilitating fair access and the wide range of interest groups that have a stake in this agenda. This was a pleasant surprise. I was really surprised at how many people wanted to speak to me in my role as Commissioner.

The invites came in thick and fast. In my first year I had 111 different appointments in a 12-month period. These came from representative bodies such as Universities Scotland which is the organisation that represents universities, Scottish Government civil servants and politicians, interest groups, and individuals, like Laurence, who specialise in this field. Perhaps this level of interest shouldn't have surprised me, but it really did. The breadth of interest presents its own challenges because there are many different perspectives on what fair access should be. But it is reassuring that social purpose, progression, social justice, promoting the right to education, and facilitating means for disadvantaged students to access higher education are so embedded in the Scottish higher education ecosystem.

But I also realised that my practice could be improved and perhaps had to change. I was always somebody who was sensitive to student needs by virtue of the institution I teach in.[12] I don't like describing institutions as 'widening access institutions', because I believe that all institutions have a responsibility to widen access. But, facilitating access to a broader range of students is more central to the purpose of my institution, compared to some of the more research-intensive institutions. So, although I have been aware for a long, long time of the diverse range of student needs, I just became much more sensitive and aware of the practical things that I could change to facilitate access and improve students' experience of higher education.

Fiona had mentioned the cost-of-living crisis. I have also become much more aware in recent years of the volume of paid work that students are doing over and above their studies. And, they are working simply to exist. Being aware of this, can we change the way in which we arrange the university week? If we know that many students are juggling work and study, we should not be asking them to commute significant distances on a daily basis (and this is particularly an issue for rural students, many of whom are commuting students) to attend for one hour or two in class.

For example, I have one first year student who gets a ferry to the mainland and then gets a train (one hour each way) into the city to attend university. That particular student has childcare issues, because our university schedule is not aligned with school holidays, which simply meant, she ran out of childcare options and simply couldn't attend university during one of the school holidays. If you are asking that student to attend a one-hour lecture at 4pm in the afternoon, and that is their only class on that day, then we should not be surprised when the student makes the logical decision not to attend. Inevitably, attendance begins to tail off and therefore engagement and sense of belonging to the institution are weakened as a result.

So, through being Commissioner I thought much more about these issues than I had in the past. I was always sensitive to student needs, but I am much more attuned to it, and I think much keener to make changes to practice that can facilitate a difference. Each may be a small-scale change in the grand scheme of things, but this agenda has to belong to a range of people—more than university executives and widening access practitioners. Meeting the metrics is an issue for university executives. Raising aspirations and making school pupils aware of the opportunities that are open to them is an issue for widening access practitioners. But I think we need many

---

[11] Professor McKendrick is also Co-Director of the Scottish Poverty and Inequality Research Unit - https://www.gcu.ac.uk/aboutgcu/academicschools/gsbs/research/spiru
[12] Glasgow Caledonian University

others in higher education to re-examine what we do, how we behave, and how we choose to design our programmes.

So, I think in many, many ways I've been pleasantly surprised. But I've also been ashamed at the lack of awareness that I had beforehand. But this work has absolutely strengthened my resolve to do what I can in the role that I have to try and make a positive difference, by working alongside others. I can't change the system myself. I see myself as being a focal point and a bit of a pest as well. I am keen to learn about what works best (from Australia and elsewhere) and to use my position to advocate for change. I'm very comfortable doing that.

Chief Editor: That's very interesting. Fiona, you might have covered some of these before, but what are the consistent barriers to education raised by stakeholders that you have conversation for?

REC: I really do reflect a lot of the things I've mentioned before, John, because of the nature of my job, it very much is as an advocate and it's to give advice to government on regional education issues. In a lot of ways, I'm the conduit between the people on the ground, stakeholders, and government. So, the things that I say are not a result of some great brain snap that Fiona Nash has had along the way, a lot of the time it's corralling and collecting all of that information and just talking to people all of the time out on the ground about the challenges that are there. And then, far more importantly, what the solutions are. I always say the best solutions come from the people on the ground who are actually living and breathing these issues, who get what needs to be done to actually get across the challenges. One of the barriers to education is—and I'd only just thought of this after you were speaking John—was when you were making the comments about sort of the attitudes from the institutions. There are quite a different set of attitudes across institutions around the level of involvement and energy they should be putting towards solving some of these equity issues. Some universities are really good at it and they're very focused on their equity cohorts and they're doing a lot in terms of student support and encouraging students from those cohorts to attend their institutions. Others, not so much. Institutions need encouragement to be more aware of what I think really is their responsibility in doing a better job. That would certainly reduce what is one of the consistent barriers to tertiary education in addition to those I mentioned before—the cost, the tyranny of distance, the lack of support, the difficulties in moving away from families, stepping away from social networks, not having that community connectivity once they move away. These are really challenging things for regional students.

Chief Editor: Fantastic. We did have a couple of other questions, but time has moved on much quicker than we anticipated, and we want to give you some time to have a bit of a chat with each other. Our last question is about the positive cases you've seen within the education which have improved access for equity groups?

[The two Commissioners kindly agreed to provide their answers to this question in writing.]

REC: The Australian Universities Accord (O'Kane et al., 2024)—a 12-month review of the higher education system, of which I was a panel member—is one example where equity was a central focus, reflected in the panel's consultations, discussions and the subsequent recommendations. The Accord's final report, which is currently being considered by government, makes a commitment to increasing higher education participation from equity groups, specifically referencing regional, rural, and remote students whose participation and attainment needs to be increased.

In the regions, a student's access to tertiary education is limited by financial constraints, distance, and availability. In recent years, I've heard about and seen great results from the Regional University Study Hubs program, which addresses equity and access issues by providing regional,

rural and remote students study spaces, high speed internet access, administrative and academic support services and support from other students while they study the tertiary course of their choice on-line and remain in their local community. Last year I attended the graduation ceremony of a cohort of students from a Study Hub in the Kimberley—a remote region in Western Australia with over 100 First Nations communities—and got the opportunity to see students graduate from a range of degrees with a group of peers in their own community, hundreds, or sometimes thousands of miles from their university provider's main campus, without having missed out on the social and administrative support aspects of the on-campus experience.

My role also allows me to hear inspirational stories and positive case studies where a community has started a grassroots initiative to address their unique needs from the ground up to address equity issues. Limited subject options for regional high school students presents a barrier to choosing a tertiary education pathway, an issue which is being addressed through the Eyre Peninsula Local Delivery Program, developed by secondary schools in a remote part of South Australia. The program delivers virtual subjects to students that are not available at their own school and offers South Australian Certificate of Education subjects, vocational education and training subjects and school-based apprenticeships. This program is a great example of how to avoid a 'one-size-fits-all' approach, and how flexible models could be taken to different regional, rural and remote communities and changed to adapt to their specific needs.

CfFA: There is no shortage of actions in Scotland that appear to be effecting positive change. Every single university in Scotland showcases this good practice in its annual Outcome Agreement,[13] which requires them to report on their work to promote fair access. However, if I was to highlight just one intervention then I would pick SCAPP (Scotland's Community of Access and Participation Practitioners),[14] which was established in response to one of the Commission on Widening Access recommendations in 2016. Giving recognition to their work, and providing the means to share learning and engender a sense of shared purpose across institutions is to my mind the single greatest achievement of the work to widen access in Scotland … so far!

Chief Editor: It is now time to close this conversation. Thank you very much!

Links (Including both Commissioners' Reports)

Australia:

https://www.education.gov.au/regional-education-commissioner

Scotland:

https://www.gov.scot/publications/renewing-alliance-fair-access-annual-report-2024/

References

Commission on Widening Access (2016). *A blueprint for fairness*. Scottish Government. https://www.gov.scot/publications/blueprint-fairness-final-report-commission-widening-access/

Kinnane, S., Wilks, J., Wilson, K., Hughes, T., & Thomas, S. (2014). *'Can't be what you can't see': The transition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students into higher education.* https://www.notredame.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0020/2882/SI11-2138-OLT-Final-Report-FINAL-Web.pdf

---

[13] https://www.sfc.ac.uk/assurance-accountability/outcome-agreements-listing/
[14] https://www.fairaccess.scot/scapp-scotlands-community-of-access-and-participation-practitioners/

Napthine, D., Graham, C., Lee, P., & Wills, M. (2019). *National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy: Final Report.* https://www.education.gov.au/download/4663/national-regional-rural-and-remote-tertiary-education-strategy-final-report/6981/document/pdf

O'Kane, M., Behrendt, L., Glover, B., Macklin, J., Nash, F., Rimmer, B., & Wikramanayake, S. (2024). *Australian Universities Accord Final Report* Australian Government Department of Education. https://www.education.gov.au/download/17990/australian-universities-accord-final-report-document/36760/australian-universities-accord-final-report/pdf