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# Introduction

1.1     On Wednesday 27 November 2019, the committee adopted an inquiry referred by the Minister for Education, the Hon. Dan Tehan MP, to inquire into and report on the education of students in remote and complex environments.

1.2     The Terms of Reference are set out in the front pages of this report.

1.3     In undertaking this inquiry, the committee was concerned that regional, rural and remote students' achievement in school, in Year 12 and in tertiary education has been lower than that of metropolitan students for many years.

1.4     Regardless of where they live, young Australians should be supported to meet their potential with high quality education and meaningful pathways to further education and employment.

1.5     The committee examined how education meets the learning needs of students and how barriers in education can be overcome.

1.6     The committee was mindful that significant work is being undertaken to address the issues outlined in this report, including responses to recently concluded reviews, and has sought to consolidate and extend on those findings and recommendations.

## Scope and conduct of the inquiry

1.7     The committee called for submissions from interested individuals and organisations, and held initial public hearings in Canberra on 5, 12 and 26 February 2020.

1.8     Submissions are listed at Appendix A.

1.9     Details of public hearings are listed at Appendix B.

1.10    As a consequence of the disruptions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, the committee deferred plans to visit regional and remote communities in New South Wales, South Australia, Western Australia and Queensland.

1.11    The committee would have welcomed the opportunity to hear first-hand from regional and remote communities about the education challenges they face. The committee is grateful to those who had been prepared to host hearings and visits during the inquiry, and who assisted with planning prior to the interruptions and uncertainty imposed by the emerging pandemic.

1.12    The committee invited further submissions addressing adaptations and solutions to challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic to education.

1.13    To further examine the issues highlighted in the written submissions, while respecting constraints around travel, the committee held a series of roundtable public hearings via teleconference. The roundtable hearings focussed on school education and further education on 26 August 2020, and early childhood education, and barriers to education on 2 September 2020. Testimony at the hearings reinforced the excellent evidence received in written submissions.

1.14    The committee is aware that a limited number of stakeholders could be included in the public hearing program, but acknowledges the thoughtful and comprehensive contributions made in written submissions. All contributions, written and verbal, have been given careful consideration.
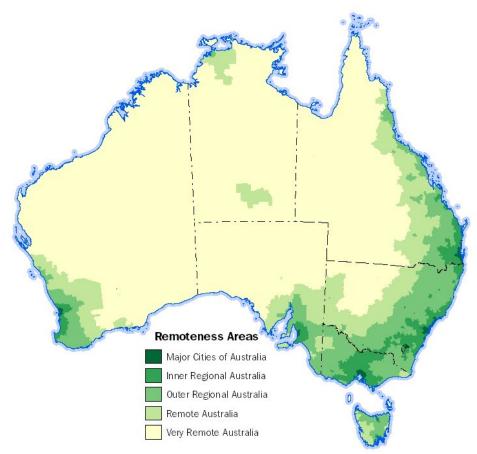
## Structure of the report

1.15    This introductory chapter provides an overview of:
- the education attainment gap between students living in regional and remote areas and those in metropolitan areas, and
- the current policy context for education in remote and complex environments, including a discussion of recent reviews.

1.16    The remaining chapters examine the inquiry evidence across four themes:
- Chapter two - barriers to education that are external to education systems
- Chapter three - early childhood education
- Chapter four - school education, and
- Chapter five - further education and employment.

# A note on definitions

1.17    Geographical categories used in this report, such as 'regional' and
        'remote', follow the Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS).
        The ASGS has five classes of remoteness based on relative access to
        services: major cities, inner regional, outer regional, remote and very
        remote. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) notes that access to
        services are measured using the Accessibility and Remoteness Index of
        Australia (ARIA+).[1]

1.18    In this report, the term 'remote' is used to describe both remote and very
        remote areas. The term 'rural' does not correspond to any specific class of
        area within the ASGS framework. The term 'metropolitan' has been used
        and refers to the major cities category in ASGS.

**Figure        Map of Remoteness Areas for Australia**



*Source    Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS): Volume 5 -
Remoteness Structure, 1270.0.55.005, July 2016.*

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1    ABS, *Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS): Volume 5 - Remoteness Structure*,
     1270.0.55.005, July 2016.

## The education attainment gap

1.19    Australians growing up in regional and remote areas have lower educational attainment rates in school, in Year 12 and in tertiary education, compared to those living in metropolitan areas. They are around 40 per cent less likely to gain a higher-level tertiary education qualification and less than half as likely to receive a bachelor and above qualification by the time they are 35 years old, compared to people from metropolitan areas. This gap is most pronounced in remote and very remote areas and at university level.[2]

1.20    Achievement in education in regional and remote areas has been lower than in metropolitan areas for decades, as evidenced by:

- National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) results

- two international tests of school students—the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), and

- rates of successful completion of year 12 or equivalent qualification (at the level of Certificate III or higher) by the age of 19.[3]

1.21    In relation 'to a student's transition to university and the proportion of persons aged 25–34 years with a bachelor degree or above, there is a decreasing trend with increasing remoteness.'[4]

1.22    In relation to 'vocational education and training (VET), non-metropolitan participation rates are comparable with urban rates and completion rates for Certificate III exceed urban (38 per cent compared to 35 per cent), but at the diploma level the situation is reversed (10 per cent compared to 16 per cent).[5]

1.23    In 2019, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) reported that 'the proportion of young people fully engaged in work and/or study has been

2    Department of Education, Regional Education Expert Advisory Group, National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy, *Final Report*, August 2019, p. 11.
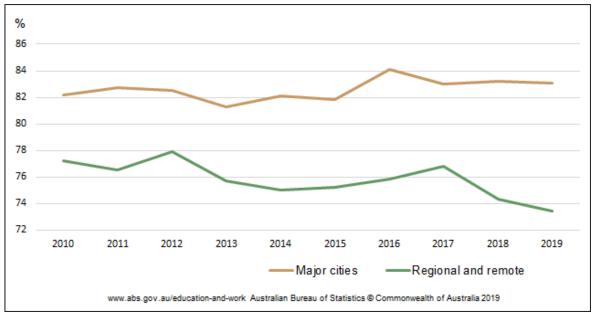
3    Emeritus Professor John Halsey, Department of Education and Training, *Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education* (Halsey review), January 2018, p. 4.

4    Emeritus Professor John Halsey, Department of Education and Training, Halsey review, January 2018, p. 4.

5    Emeritus Professor John Halsey, Department of Education and Training, Halsey review, January 2018, p. 4.

consistently higher in major cities than in regional and remote Australia' over the past decade.[6]

1.24 The ABS also reported that the gap in engagement in further educational and training is widening between metropolitan and regional and remote areas. The proportion of 15-24 year olds fully engaged in work and/or study decreased in regional and remote areas between 2017 and 2019, which correlates with the duration of the current drought (see Figure 1.1).[7]

**Figure** **Proportion of 15-24 year olds fully engaged in work and/or study, by remoteness, 2010-19**



www.abs.gov.au/education-and-work  Australian Bureau of Statistics © Commonwealth of Australia 2019

*Source* *ABS, 6227.0 - Education and Work, Australia, 13 November 2019.*

1.25 The gap in the engagement of young people in work and/or study between non-remote and remote areas is similar among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, however overall levels of engagement are significantly lower. According to the 2016 Census, more than half (52 per cent) of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15 to 24 years were fully engaged in work or study. Those living in urban areas (55 per cent) were more likely to be fully engaged in work or study than those living in non-urban areas (42 per cent). In contrast, 67 per cent of non-Indigenous people were engaged in some mix of education, employment and training in 2016.[8]

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6    Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), *6227.0 - Education and Work*, Australia, 13 November 2019.

7    Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), *6227.0 - Education and Work*, Australia, 13 November 2019.

8    ABS, *2076.0 - Census of Population and Housing: Characteristics of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians*, 'Community Engagement', 19 February 2018.

1.26    In 2019, the National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education
        Strategy (Napthine review) reported that, compared to their metropolitan
        peers, regional and remote students are:

- **Less likely to complete secondary schooling:** 80.3 per cent of
  students in metropolitan areas complete Year 12 or equivalent
  by the age of 19, falling to 63.9 per cent in inner regional areas
  and 40.3 per cent in very remote regions.
- **Less likely to apply for higher education:** Young people from
  RRR areas who do complete schooling are far less likely to go
  onto higher education. Even when controlling for differences in
  ATAR scores, regional students are less likely to attend
  university than those from metropolitan areas.
- **Less likely to accept their university offer:** While university
  applicants from regional areas are more likely to receive an
  offer when they apply, they are less likely to accept it
  (70 per cent compared to 77 per cent for metropolitan students).
- **More likely to defer university offers**: RRR students are twice
  as likely to defer their university offer.
- **Less likely to complete tertiary education:** The completion rate
  for domestic, bachelor-level university students six years after
  commencing in 2012, is 65.5 per cent for students from
  metropolitan areas, compared to 61.4 per cent for inner
  regional, 58.5 per cent for outer regional, and 48.7 per cent for
  remote areas. Similarly, projected VET completion rates are
  lower for students in RRR areas.[9]

## Social and economic costs of the education attainment gap

1.27    In the 2017 review conducted on behalf of the Department of Education
        and Training, Emeritus Professor John Halsey estimated that 'people not
        in full-time work or study by age 24 and who continue in this way over a
        40-year period, produce a cost impact on society of around $412,000 per
        person'.[10] He noted that 'the total fiscal and social cost of a lifetime of
        disengagement is $69.3 billion', representing approximately 15 per cent of
        all Australian government budgeted expenditure for 2016/17.[11]

9    Department of Education, Regional Education Expert Advisory Group, National Regional,
     Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy (Napthine review), *Final Report*, August 2019,
     p. 13.
10   Emeritus Professor John Halsey, Department of Education and Training, Halsey review,
     January 2018, p. 24.
11   Emeritus Professor John Halsey, Department of Education and Training, Halsey review,
     January 2018, p. 24. Calculation is based on 2014 data.

1.28     Professor Halsey also said:

> In a similar vein, it is well documented that one consequence of young people becoming disengaged from education before they complete their schooling is a greater propensity for them to drift into crime and then becoming involved in the juvenile justice system. The financial costs associated with this far exceed those of providing a 'top quality' education and there are major social implications and costs as well.[12]

# Recent reviews and policy context

## International treaty obligations

1.29     Both World Vision[13] and the Australian Human Rights Commission noted that a child's right to education is enshrined in the following international treaties:

- United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)(1989), ratified by Australia in 1990, and

- International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) (1966), ratified by Australia in 1975.[14]

1.30     World Vision commented that Australia has undertaken to 'respect and ensure' rights under these treaties for every child, 'without discrimination of any kind' and that 'geography, remoteness, distance, language, culture, religion, disability and sex cannot be used as excuses when a child's right to education is at stake.'[15]

## Closing the Gap

1.31     In July 2020, the new national agreement on Closing the Gap was released, which includes 16 targets to reduce the disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People.[16]

1.32     Given the centrality of the Closing the Gap agreement in shaping Commonwealth policy in partnership with the states and territories, and

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12   Emeritus Professor John Halsey, Department of Education and Training, Halsey review, January 2018, p. 24.

13   World Vision, *Submission 51*, p. 3.

14   Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC), *Submission 1*, p. 6

15   World Vision, *Submission 51*, p. 3.

16   Commonwealth of Australia, *National Agreement on Closing the Gap*, July 2020, <https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/sites/default/files/files/national-agreement-ctg.pdf?q=0720> viewed 30 July 2020.

with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peak organisations, relevant targets are included in chapters two to five of this report.

## Halsey review

1.33    In 2017, the Government commissioned Professor Halsey to examine the challenges faced by students in regional and remote areas and find innovative solutions to help them succeed at school and beyond.

1.34    In January 2018, the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education (Halsey Review) made eleven recommendations and suggested fifty-three actions as examples of how to progress them. Professor Halsey remarked:

> Together the recommendations and actions encompass curriculum and assessment, principals and teachers, ensuring that students get the best start possible to their education, expanding VET and university opportunities and pathways, philanthropy and entrepreneurship, ICT, improving the support available to move away from home, and building a high level national focus on regional, rural and remote education and training.[17]

1.35    In May 2018, the government accepted all 11 recommendations of the Halsey review, noting:

> Many of the actions are very specific and may cut across existing initiatives, work plans, funding arrangements and levels of government. In these circumstances, the actions provide a starting point for the many conversations that will continue to flow from the IRRRRE [Halsey Review] final report.[18]

1.36    Given similarities in the scope of the Halsey review with this inquiry, relevant recommendations are provided along with the government's response to those recommendations at the end of chapters two and four of this report.

## Napthine review

1.37    On 12 November 2018, the Minister for Education, the Hon Dan Tehan MP, announced that the government would develop a National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy (Napthine review) focused on improving tertiary education participation and outcomes for students from regional, rural and remote areas, as part

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17    Emeritus Professor John Halsey, Department of Education and Training, Halsey review, January 2018, p. 5.

18    Department of Education and Training, *Australian Government Response to the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education*, 30 May 2018, p. 6.

of a broader regional education package. The review's advisory group was led by former Victorian Premier, the Hon Dr Denis Napthine.

1.38    Minister Tehan said that the Napthine review would build on the government's response to the Halsey review.[19]

1.39    The final report of the Napthine review was released on 28 August 2019. It made seven recommendations and proposed 33 related actions.[20]

1.40    In 2019, Minister Tehan said 'the government accepted the aims of the seven key recommendations' and noted:

> The government would consult on the 33 specific actions and respond in due course. Many of the actions involve a different approach to current policy settings, require possible reform of the sector and budgetary considerations. These actions also require engagement with state and territory governments and different portfolio areas.[21]

1.41    Minister Tehan also acknowledged that this strategy would take ten years to realise.[22]

1.42    In June 2020, the Morrison Government announced an additional $400 million package to increase opportunities for regional, rural and remote students to access tertiary education and support regional university campuses. As part of the package of reforms, Minister Tehan announced that a Regional Education Commissioner will be appointed 'to drive the Napthine reforms and support the implementation of the government's Regional Education Strategy.'[23]

1.43    Given similarities in the scope of the Napthine review with this inquiry, the review's recommendations are provided along with the government's response to those recommendations at the end of chapter five of this report.

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19    The Hon Dan Tehan MP, Minister for Education, *Media Release*, 'National Regional, Rural and Remote Education Strategy', 12 November 2018.

20    Department of Education, Napthine review, *Final Report*, August 2019, p. 13.

21    The Hon Dan Tehan MP, Minister for Education and The Hon Mark Coulton MP, Minister for Regional Services, Decentralisation and Local Government, *Joint Media Release*, 'National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy', 28 August 2019.

22    The Hon Dan Tehan MP, Minister for Education and The Hon Mark Coulton MP, Minister for Regional Services, Decentralisation and Local Government, *Joint Media Release*, 'National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy', 28 August 2019.

23    The Hon Dan Tehan MP, Minister for Education, *Media Release*, 'Tertiary reforms to unleash potential of regional Australia', 19 June 2020.

## Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration

1.44    On 12 December 2019, a new national declaration of education goals was endorsed by all Council of Australian Governments (COAG) education ministers. The Alice Springs (*Mparntwe*) Education Declaration sets out two education goals for young Australians:

- Goal 1: The Australian education system promotes excellence and equity.

- Goal 2: All young Australians become confident and creative individuals, successful lifelong learners, and active and informed members of the community.[24]

1.45    The *Mparntwe* Education Declaration notes that:

> Achieving these education goals is the responsibility of Australian Governments and the education community in partnership with young Australians, their families and carers and the broader community.[25]

1.46    Education Ministers also agreed to fast-track a review of the entire Australian Curriculum with an initial focus on maths and science.[26]

## National School Reform Agreement

1.47    The government released the National School Reform Agreement in November 2018, a joint arrangement between the Commonwealth, States and Territories to improve student outcomes across Australian schools. The Agreement was informed by the findings and recommendations of the Halsey review, the *Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools*, and the final report of the *STEM Partnerships forum*.

1.48    The Agreement identifies 'students living in regional, rural and remote locations' as a 'priority equity cohort'.[27]

## Previous parliamentary inquiries and other reviews

1.49    The former House of Representatives Employment, Education and Training Committee conducted two education related inquiries during the 45th Parliament: an inquiry into school to work transition (2018), and the

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24    Council of Australian Governments (COAG) Education Council, *Alice Springs (Mparntwe), Education Declaration*, December 2019, p. 4.

25    COAG Education Council, *Alice Springs (Mparntwe), Education Declaration*, December 2019, p. 4.

26    COAG Education Council, *Communiqué*, Alice Springs, 12 December 2019, p. 2.

27    COAG, *National School Reform Agreement,* 5 November 2018, p. 7.

status of the teaching profession (2019). Evidence received for the latter noted challenges in retaining experienced teachers in remote locations.[28]

1.50    Government responses to these two reports remain outstanding at the time of writing.

1.51    The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs conducted an inquiry into educational opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (2017). It found that 'the persistent gap in education outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students indicates that, in many cases, the education system is not meeting the needs of Indigenous students.[29]

1.52    The government responded to the inquiry into educational opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in August 2020. Of the 20 recommendations contained in the final report of the committee, the government agreed or agreed in principle with five recommendations, noted 14 recommendations and did not agree with one recommendation.[30]

1.53    The former House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs conducted an inquiry into language learning in Indigenous communities (2012). It found that 'Indigenous language is inseparable from culture, and is the foundation upon which the capacity to learn and interact productively with other people is built.'[31]

1.54    The government response to the language learning inquiry noted that the 'importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages and culture has been recognised in the development of the Australian Curriculum.'[32] It also noted that 'decisions about how schools offer

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28    House of Representatives Employment, Education and Training Committee, *Unique Individuals, Broad Skills: Inquiry into school to work transition*, May 2018; House of Representatives Employment, Education and Training Committee, *Status of the teaching profession*, October 2019.

29    House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs, *The power of education: From surviving to thriving Educational opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students*, December 2017, p. xv.

30    Government response to House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs, *The power of education: From surviving to thriving Educational opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students*, August 2020.

31    House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, *Our land, our languages: language learning in Indigenous communities*, September 2012, p. 1.

32    Government response to House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, *Our land, our languages: language learning in Indigenous communities*, June 2013, p. 7.

learning programs, including bilingual education, are matters for state and territory education authorities.' [33]

## Other recent education related reviews

1.55    More broadly, multiple reviews have been conducted into issues relating to education. These reviews include:

- *Action Now: Classroom Ready Teachers* (2018), the final report of the Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group

- *Optimising Stem Industry-School Partnerships: Inspiring Australia's Next Generation* (2018), the final report of the *STEM Partnerships forum*

- *Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools* (2018)

- *Australia 2030: Prosperity through Innovation* (2017), and

- *Red Dirt Education: A Compilation of Learning from the Remote Education Systems Project* (2016). The Remote Education Systems research project considered how education could better meet the needs of those living in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

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33    Government response to House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, *Our land, our languages: language learning in Indigenous communities*, June 2013, p. 9.