

Further education and employment

- 5.1 Previous chapters have noted that participation and achievement in higher education decreases with remoteness. The National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy (Naphthine review) found that individuals who grow up in regional, rural and remote communities are around 40 per cent less likely to gain a higher-level tertiary education qualification, and less than half as likely to gain a bachelor and above qualification by the time they are 35 years old, compared to individuals from metropolitan areas.¹
- 5.2 The Naphthine review also found that, conversely, Vocational Education and Training (VET) participation is higher in regional, rural and remote areas and increases with remoteness, but noted participation ‘tends to focus on lower level qualifications (Certificate I, II and III).’²
- 5.3 This chapter examines:
- a range of factors influencing the low participation of regional, rural and remote students in higher education including the importance of building aspiration, and receiving advice and support about options for further education and employment
 - the potential of online and flexible learning to bridge gaps in access and equity in further education
 - the importance of pathways for school students to gain skills at school through Vocational Education and Training in Schools (VETiS)
 - a range of factors limiting VET provision in regional, rural and remote areas, including increased costs, funding and workforce issues, and

1 Department of Education, Regional Education Expert Advisory Group, National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy (Naphthine review), *Final Report*, August 2019, p. 11.

2 Naphthine review, *Final Report*, August 2019, p. 11.

- the need for the VET sector to address regional skills shortages so that Australians in regional, rural and remote communities can fill skilled vacancies in their local areas.
- 5.4 The chapter concludes with a summary, noting relevant Closing the Gap targets, and recommendations from the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education (Halsey review) and the Napthine review.

Higher education

- 5.5 The Department of Education, Skills and Employment (DESE) noted that there are substantial benefits associated with supporting people from regional and remote areas to access higher education, including broadened career opportunities, increased earning outcomes, and improved life expectancy and health outcomes.³
- 5.6 DESE estimates that halving the gap in higher education attainment rates between metropolitan and regional, rural and remote higher education could increase Gross Domestic Product (GDP) by \$25 billion by 2050.⁴

Aspiration

- 5.7 Lower participation rates of students from regional, rural and remote areas in higher education have been attributed to both fewer opportunities and differences in students' aspirations.⁵
- 5.8 Charles Sturt University (CSU) suggested that a lack of awareness of opportunities contributes to these differences in aspiration. CSU noted that distance is 'a barrier to access to higher education – not only because of the additional costs it can impose on remote and regional students, but because it reduces their awareness of higher education as an option.'⁶
- 5.9 Association of Heads of Independent Schools Australia (AHISA) noted the significance of role models such as teachers, doctors and specialists in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, stating:

...they are really significant, because other young people can see what they can be, and you don't know what you can be unless you

3 Department of Education, Skills and Employment (DESE), *Submission 49*, p. 41.

4 DESE, *Submission 49*, p. 41.

5 Department of Education, Regional Education Expert Advisory Group, National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy, *Framing Paper*, 2019, p. 6.

6 Charles Sturt University (CSU), *Submission 41*, p. 3.

can see what you can be, and those opportunities often aren't there in those areas.⁷

5.10 The National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO) similarly noted that awareness of career pathway initiatives needs to commence early in high school, with students 'being presented with the option of pursuing further education and training in a supported environment'.⁸

5.11 Queensland University of Technology (QUT) suggested that low expectations of students may be a barrier to increasing awareness of higher education opportunities. They reported that a recent jobs fair held in the Moreton Bay North region 'featured a high proportion of offerings for unskilled or low-skill work', and noted:

In light of the low aspiration for higher learning recorded in the area (22.4 per cent of year 12 completers at the local public school expressed interest in studying for a bachelor degree, which is 36.6 per cent lower than national enrolment rate), the Fair's list of exhibitors and scheduled workshops suggests that this event was designed to fit within a narrow conception of the local culture rather than extend or diversify it.⁹

5.12 QUT expressed concern about the effect of cultural issues on higher education participation. They advised that 'the low rates of determination to enter tertiary education post year 12 for students' in the inner regional area to the north of Brisbane was affected by 'social and cultural drivers'.¹⁰

5.13 QUT also noted that many in the Moreton Bay North region are disadvantaged and that the 'social determinants that underpin the opportunity and potential for the future of a young person who lives in this region, are driven by barriers which are not generally experienced in the same range as those in the inner city'.¹¹

5.14 According to QUT, communities can have a 'gravitational pull' on student aspiration.¹² QUT explained that this effect:

...can inhibit residents from developing goals that will see them vary from the norms around them, whether professional, cultural

7 Ms Beth Blackwood, Chief Executive Officer, Association of Heads of Independent Schools Australia (AHISA), *Committee Hansard*, Canberra, 26 February 2020, p. 6.

8 National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO), *Submission 44*, p. 6.

9 Queensland University of Technology (QUT), *Submission 39*, p. 4.

10 QUT, *Submission 39*, p. 5.

11 QUT, *Submission 39*, p. 3.

12 QUT, *Submission 39*, p. 3.

or educational. This can include the inhibition of students' development of aspiration to proceed to tertiary education (whether university or VET), even where the student harbours an enthusiasm to continue on to further study. Students require a supportive network to succeed. While a student's aspiration may be to 'push' ahead with a determination to further their education, the 'pull' of family expectations and demands can hold students back to a future of horizontal mobility.¹³

- 5.15 CSU advised that being the first in the family to attend higher education is a 'well-recognised barrier to participation in higher education'.¹⁴ CSU stated:

Such students often experience a kind of 'impostor syndrome': a sense that they do not belong at university, that they are less capable of meeting the challenges of their studies. These feelings can be exacerbated by relatively lower levels of attainment for students in regional and remote areas. First-in-family students are often less likely to ask others for help, and likely to take poor results much harder than their fellow-students. And as is the case for many other students from regional and remote areas, they may have to struggle with these challenges away from the support of their family and friends.¹⁵

- 5.16 Remote Indigenous Parents Australia (RIPA) was concerned that 'there is a lack of effective pathways' to employment and training in many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and that 'the only pathway leads to the Centrelink office.'¹⁶ RIPA commented:

The current lack of genuine and sustainable employment in many, if not most, remote Indigenous Communities results in high levels of unemployment. This therefore requires families to rely on Centrelink and welfare.'¹⁷

- 5.17 The Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations of New South Wales noted there are many challenges faced by students in remote areas when transitioning to post-school life, including lack of access to career advice, lack of focus on vocational options and lack of opportunities in remoter areas. They advocated for students in regional and remote areas to receive

13 QUT, *Submission 39*, p. 3.

14 CSU, *Submission 41*, p. 4.

15 CSU, *Submission 41*, p. 4.

16 Remote Indigenous Parents Australia (RIPA), *Submission 23*, p. 4.

17 RIPA, *Submission 23*, p. 4.

more career information at school and for trade jobs to be promoted and supported with high quality trade training centres.¹⁸

- 5.18 CSU suggested that outreach activities in regional rural and remote communities could reduce barriers to participation. CSU provided the example of its 'Future Moves' project, which is funded through the Australian government's Higher Education Participation and Partnership Program (HEPPP). In 2019, the project engaged with 91 partner schools to deliver 65 events and 200 school workshops, resulting in almost 15,000 points of contact with school students. CSU reported:

The project has had a noticeable impact on Indigenous students, who made up 17 per cent of the participants and reported significant shifts in their awareness of, aspiration to, and likelihood of participating in higher education – as did other participants in Future Moves.¹⁹

- 5.19 To increase the availability of career information in regional, rural and remote communities, La Trobe University (La Trobe) recommended supplementing career information practices in schools with a whole-of-community approach to career advice. According to La Trobe, 'such an approach, potentially coordinated at national level, should be designed to increase community aspiration and knowledge to translate into better outcomes for students.'²⁰

- 5.20 Currently, La Trobe operates the Pathway Program, which is available at the university's Albury-Wodonga and Shepparton campuses and funded by the university and through philanthropic means with a contribution from the HEPPP. The program 'consists of a structured framework of mentoring, well-being workshops, academic capacity building and university preparedness which is embedded in the curriculum of participating government schools over an 18-month period.'²¹ La Trobe reported that the program 'has been highly successful – with a 44 per cent increase in student enrolment from 2018 to 2019 from participating schools.'²²

- 5.21 The Country Education Partnership (CEP) provides a range of programs to help build the aspirations of students in regional, rural and remote areas, including the Rural Youth Ambassadors Program and the Rural Inspire Initiative. Recommendation 8 of the Halsey review (chapter 4)

18 Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations of New South Wales, *Submission 20*, pp. 4-5.

19 CSU, *Submission 41*, p. 3.

20 La Trobe University (La Trobe), *Submission 36*, p. 8.

21 La Trobe, *Submission 36*, p. 2.

22 La Trobe, *Submission 36*, p. 2.

supported the provision of funding to expand the CEP's initiatives. Mr Phil Brown from the CEP reported that the Education Minister has allocated some funding to allow the CEP to extend its programs to South Australia and New South Wales this year and 'will hopefully go nationwide by 2021.'²³

Access and equity

- 5.22 According to DESE, in 2018 there were 172,187 domestic undergraduate students from regional and remote Australia enrolled in higher education. 30.1 per cent (51,875) of these students were also from low SES backgrounds.²⁴
- 5.23 The Naphthine review found that various factors can prevent students in regional, rural and remote communities from successfully undertaking tertiary study, including:
- fewer local study options and the need to relocate
 - problems accessing high quality career advice, and
 - lack of access to reliable, high speed internet.²⁵
- 5.24 CSU suggested that caps on student numbers are impeding the ability of universities to produce skilled graduates in regional, rural and remote communities. They advised that 'the continuing cap on Commonwealth Supported Places imposes a firm limit on the University's ability to meet growing demand for higher education and for skilled graduates in regional and remote areas.'²⁶
- 5.25 CSU recommended removing the cap on places in universities with a strong presence outside major metropolitan centres, or providing additional funding to them.²⁷
- 5.26 Online Education Services (OES) also advocated for an increase in the number of Commonwealth-funded university places offered to regional students.²⁸
- 5.27 DESE advised that the government has accepted the recommendations of the Naphthine Review and they are developing a response.²⁹

23 Mr Phil Brown, Executive Officer, Country Education Partnership, *Committee Hansard*, 12 February 2020, Canberra, p. 2.

24 DESE, *Submission 49*, p. 44.

25 Naphthine review, *Final Report*, August 2019, p. 13.

26 CSU, *Submission 41*, p. 5.

27 CSU, *Submission 41*, p. 5.

28 Online Education Services (OES), *Submission 25*, p. 5.

29 DESE, *Submission 49*, p. 42.

Regional universities

- 5.28 Regional universities provide valuable opportunities for students to study locally and make important contributions to their regional economies. For example, the Regional Universities Network contributed \$1.7 billion to GDP in their regions through employing staff, spending, research and innovation.³⁰
- 5.29 La Trobe reported that there are higher costs associated with delivering higher education in regional areas and that a ‘number of federal and state policy settings are making it increasingly difficult to maintain regional higher education delivery.’³¹ According to La Trobe, these include:
- The current regional loading for universities being insufficient to cover the higher costs of education provision, estimated at 17 per cent higher for regional students
 - The ‘funding freeze introduced at the end of 2017’ which ‘had a disproportionate impact on universities with regional campuses, which unlike metropolitan universities, have limited means of raising funds from other sources such as international student revenue’, and
 - ‘At a state level, the 2019 introduction of free TAFE in Victoria, while opening welcome opportunities to regional communities, has impacted demand for equivalent Higher Education courses in already very thin markets.’³²
- 5.30 La Trobe advocated for the government to:
- ‘Support the viability of regional higher education delivery through a regional loading which adequately reflects the cost of regional delivery’ and
 - ‘Provide support for the expansion of pathway programs which have been proven to raise aspiration and higher education participation in RRR communities through an additional, regional HEPPP [Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program].’³³
- 5.31 DESE advised that the government is taking the following actions to support regional universities:
- The National Priorities Pool is a component of the HEPPP and the ‘2019 National Priorities Pool funding round is focused on supporting low SES students from regional and remote Australia’³⁴

30 Napthine review, *Final Report*, August 2019, p. 39.

31 La Trobe, *Submission 36*, p. 6.

32 La Trobe, *Submission 36*, p. 6.

33 La Trobe, *Submission 36*, p. 7.

34 DESE, *Submission 49*, p. 44.

- A further commitment of \$15 million for five additional Regional University Centres (Centres) (including CSPs), as part of the government's Plan for Regional Australia. The Centres are 'community-owned facilities located in regional and remote communities that provide study spaces and high-speed internet, administrative and academic support and student support services, including pastoral care to students undertaking tertiary level study.' The total number of Centres will rise to 21 once the new Centres have been determined,³⁵ and
- The Commonwealth Grant Scheme (CGS) regional loading to help providers offset the disparity in costs and revenue at regional campuses. In 2020, higher education providers will receive more than \$75 million in CGS regional loading.³⁶

Online learning

- 5.32 Online learning is an important tool to increase the participation of students from remote areas in higher education. As noted by OES, 'online education has offered learning opportunities to many people who otherwise would never have studied through a university or major vocational institution.'³⁷
- 5.33 Online connectivity is also becoming increasingly important for regional and remote industries and employment. South West TAFE noted that there is a 'silent revolution in agriculture as the Internet of Things, remote sensing, and the use of GPS systems to monitor machinery and livestock movements are becoming mainstream tools of trade.'³⁸
- 5.34 Chapter two suggested that effective online learning is dependent on access to high-speed, reliable and affordable broadband. The rapid adaptation to home and online learning (chapter four) has highlighted the digital divide between Australians with ready access to the internet and internet-enabled devices, and those without.
- 5.35 CSU noted that providing equity in access to broadband across Australia will require investment and capacity building over several years.³⁹
- 5.36 South West TAFE stated that 'the success of online learning will hinge on regional and remote telecommunications networks and infrastructure being able to cope with more access and applications. Regional and rural

35 DESE, *Submission 49*, p. 42.

36 DESE, *Submission 49*, p. 46.

37 OES, *Submission 25*, p. 2.

38 South West TAFE, *Submission 54*, p. 10.

39 CSU, *Submission 41*, p. 5.

- internet services experience bandwidth issues and can be erratic or contain black spots.’⁴⁰
- 5.37 ICPA Australia were concerned about data restrictions for Sky Muster satellite internet customers, in particular that tertiary and vocational education students do not qualify for the additional data offered by the Sky Muster Education Service.⁴¹
- 5.38 South West TAFE stated:
- Like almost all TAFE ICT systems and networks we have ageing equipment and are ill-prepared for the massive increase in capacity needed in the future as more online content, webinars, video streaming, virtual reality and augmented reality applications are developed. More financial support at a State and Commonwealth level is needed to bring these systems up to standard.⁴²
- 5.39 The COVID-19 pandemic has required further education providers to rapidly move to online modes of delivery. As chapter 4 noted, for many students the experience of online or home based learning has been positive and education systems have shown remarkable adaptability and resilience in challenging circumstances. The response of many schools has demonstrated that, where students have access to suitable devices, a reliable internet connection and appropriate bandwidth, quality education can be delivered online and provide continuity during extreme events.
- 5.40 Chapter 4 also noted that universities have been delivering online and flexible learning for many years and were able to move their courses online in response to the pandemic.⁴³ Teacher training in online and blended modes of education delivery was viewed as being critical for successful outcomes in both school and further education.⁴⁴

Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on universities

- 5.41 The committee heard that universities are experiencing significant challenges as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, CSU reported that it ‘has been adapting to an uncertain and complex financial environment likely to persist for several years.’⁴⁵

40 South West TAFE, *Submission 54*, p. 10.

41 ICPA Australia, *Submission 7*, p. 2.

42 South West TAFE, *Submission 54*, p. 10.

43 La Trobe, *Supplementary submission 36.1*, p. 1; CSU, *Supplementary submission 41.1*, p. 2.

44 MGSE, *Submission 59*, p. 4; Mr Tom Worthington, *Submission 50*, p. 1; AITSL, *Supplementary submission 34.1*, p. 2.

45 CSU, *Supplementary submission 41.2*, p. 2.

5.42 At the roundtable hearing on 26 August 2020, La Trobe commented:

We're facing a revenue downturn of up to 25 per cent by the end of next year, so that has a profound effect on the university. Up until the end of 2019, our estimate was that the subsidy we had to bear to keep our regional campuses going was somewhere in the region of \$10 million a year. In a circumstance where you're about to lose 25 per cent of your revenue, you cannot justify continuing to subsidise regional campus operations at that level.

It just so happens that we have a council that is absolutely determined to maintain the university's commitment to regional campuses, but we have to do that in a way that becomes sustainable.⁴⁶

5.43 La Trobe called for greater recognition of the costs of delivering higher education at regional universities.⁴⁷

5.44 CSU supported La Trobe's comments, and stated:

...the cost of delivering in regional areas is extremely high and we face different challenges to our metro counterparts, so potentially increasing the regional loading might be an immediate option that could assist us. Again, there doesn't appear to be any support through JobKeeper, so we are doing our best to realise savings and we'll continue to offer what we believe is a quality online offering for our students.⁴⁸

5.45 The Australian Technology Network of Universities (ATN) also supported La Trobe's comments and was particularly concerned about universities being excluded from JobKeeper. ATN said 'that was quite a surprise to us as a sector because we support around 240,000 jobs in the Australian economy.'⁴⁹ ATN commented:

The other issue is the inability for us to take in international students due to the COVID travel restrictions. We obviously work on the principle of the health of Australians and the globe first, but international education in Australia is the largest job creator of any export industry, and it is absolutely decimated until we can revive

46 Prof. John Dewar AO, Vice Chancellor, La Trobe, *Committee Hansard*, 26 August 2020, Canberra, p. 15.

47 Prof. John Dewar AO, Vice Chancellor, La Trobe, *Committee Hansard*, 26 August 2020, Canberra, p. 15.

48 Prof. Janelle Wheat, Acting Provost and Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic), CSU, *Committee Hansard*, 26 August 2020, Canberra, p. 15.

49 Mr Luke Sheehy, Executive Director, Australian Technology Network of Universities (ATN), *Committee Hansard*, 26 August 2020, Canberra, p. 16.

it. We want to look carefully at how we can revive international education.⁵⁰

- 5.46 CSU was supportive of aspects of the government's Job Ready Graduates Package, and stated:

Measures such as the new indexation arrangements, the prospects for growing undergraduate places in regional universities, the additional places for our Joint Program in Medicine, and the commitment to build research capability in regional universities will mean that Charles Sturt can continue to meet the education, research and workforce needs of regional communities.⁵¹

- 5.47 La Trobe said that the cap on university places will present challenges next year because universities are expecting 'a very big jump in domestic student demand for places next year and that will certainly put pressure on entrance scores and some people will be disappointed.'⁵²

- 5.48 OES agreed with this statement and commented:

With the issue of employment, far more people are going to seek university qualifications to make them more employable or to retrain. There'll be a lot of loss of jobs, as we know. There will be a big emphasis on upskilling and we feel that will create a lot of pressure.⁵³

VET

- 5.49 DESE commented that a 'strong VET sector is critical to the economy and to helping prepare Australians for the workforce opportunities of today and the future', noting that:

Australia's capacity to grow, compete and thrive in a global economy has become more dependent on employers and all individuals, regardless of background or circumstance, being able to access and use the right skills at the right time. This includes flexible and applied ways of learning, including in remote and complex environments.⁵⁴

50 Mr Luke Sheehy, Executive Director, ATN, *Committee Hansard*, 26 August 2020, Canberra, p. 16.

51 CSU, *Supplementary submission 41.2*, p. 3.

52 Prof. John Dewar AO, Vice Chancellor, La Trobe, *Committee Hansard*, 26 August 2020, Canberra, p. 16.

53 Ms Sue Kokonis, Executive Director, Academic, OES, *Committee Hansard*, 26 August 2020, Canberra, p. 16.

54 DESE, *Submission 49*, p. 35.

- 5.50 DESE reported that, of the four million Australians engaged in VET in 2018, 28 per cent of students were in regional areas and a further 3 per cent were in remote or very remote areas.⁵⁵
- 5.51 As previously noted, while rates of participation in higher-level tertiary education are lower in regional, rural and remote areas compared to metropolitan areas, VET participation is higher and increases with remoteness.⁵⁶ However, regional, rural and remote VET provision tends to focus on lower level qualifications (Certificate I, II and III).⁵⁷
- 5.52 AHISA reported that a higher number of Independent schools in rural and remote areas (96 per cent) participated in school-based apprenticeship or traineeship programs, compared to schools in major cities (58 per cent).⁵⁸

VET in schools

- 5.53 Vocational Education and Training in Schools (VETiS) programs provide training and credit towards a nationally recognised VET qualification for school students as part of their senior secondary certificate. VETiS programs are delivered by Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) or by a school in partnership with an RTO.
- 5.54 The Western Australian government noted that VETiS is ‘an important part of senior schooling’ because it enables students to undertake a nationally recognised VET qualification while completing their school certificate, which ‘helps them to make effective post school transitions.’⁵⁹
- 5.55 Concerns were raised that funding issues limit the provision of VETiS. For example, South West TAFE reported that Technical and Further Education (TAFE) and schools funding models in Victoria do not fully cover the cost of VETiS and noted that, ‘sadly it is often too expensive for many students from less financially secure families, and is also a loss maker for TAFE.’⁶⁰
- 5.56 South West TAFE also reported that VETiS programs are ‘becoming more challenging to offer’, noting that:
- ...students are looking for a wider range of courses, but that leads to smaller and less economically sustainable group sizes in regional areas. In fact the range of programs being offered appears to be shrinking and we like most TAFEs, have withdrawn from auspicing TAFE programs to secondary schools as there were too

55 DESE, *Submission 49*, p. 35

56 Napthine review, *Final Report*, August 2019, p. 11.

57 Napthine review, *Final Report*, August 2019, p. 11.

58 AHISA, *Submission 2*, p. 13.

59 Western Australian Government, *Submission 6*, p. 6.

60 South West TAFE, *Submission 54*, p. 11.

many quality and compliance issues that schools could not satisfactorily meet.⁶¹

5.57 Similarly, the National Catholic Education Commission (NCEC) reported that:

Few, if any, vocational training facilities exist and there is a limited industry/business base to support traineeships and work placements. Where a mining company is located nearby, some possibilities for training may exist although minimum age restrictions apply. Trade Training Centres exist although a significant issue for schools, which have access to them, is the availability and the cost of suitable training.⁶²

5.58 NCEC noted that 'some schools face challenges in accessing TAFE, especially those in remote communities' and reported that 'schools are mostly unable to deliver VET themselves because of a lack of suitably qualified staff and equipment.'⁶³ NCEC said that 'there is a role for the federal government to widen VET access.'⁶⁴

5.59 Empowered Communities, NPY Region used the example of the Umuwa Trade Training Centre (TTC) to illustrate inconsistencies in funding arrangements across jurisdictions. A school in the Northern Territory reportedly had to pay \$7,500 plus \$160 per head to access the TTC, whereas schools from South Australia could undertake the same training for free due to subsidised access.⁶⁵

Access and equity

5.60 As noted in chapter two, students who are located vast distances from major regional centres have limited or no access to secondary school education and opportunities for tertiary or vocational education pathways while remaining within their communities, and the financial and emotional costs of relocating can be significant for the student and their family and community.⁶⁶ For example, South West TAFE noted:

the challenge rural and regional students experience when they have to leave their family support networks to study in large metro centres is significant. Financial and social pressures on these

61 South West TAFE, *Submission 54*, p. 11.

62 The National Catholic Education Commission (NCEC), *Submission 40*, p. 10.

63 NCEC, *Submission 40*, p. 10.

64 NCEC, *Submission 40*, p. 10.

65 Empowered Communities, NPY Region, *Submission 17*, p. 19.

66 Western Australian government, *Submission 6*, p. 6; Newcastle Anglican Schools, *Submission 55*, p. 1; South West TAFE, *Submission 54*, p. 7; Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia (ICPA Australia), *Submission 7*, p. 4; ICPA Qld, *Submission 4*, p. 4.

students, relative to their urban counterparts, results in lower number being able to achieve success.⁶⁷

- 5.61 While participation rates in VET are higher for students in rural, regional and remote locations compared to metropolitan areas, the provision of VET is uneven across Australia. It was reported that barriers to VET provision includes geographical remoteness and the capacity of RTOs to service remote communities, transport and licensing, low literacy and numeracy, and thin markets (where the number of students enrolled is below benchmark).⁶⁸
- 5.62 Gunnedah Shire Council indicated that student number benchmarks were problematic, and reported that ‘the minimum number of students to be able to deliver a course at Gunnedah TAFE is 14 students. This number is too large for a population size such as Gunnedah’s to meet on a yearly basis.’⁶⁹
- 5.63 The Australian Education Union (AEU) expressed concern there have been ‘huge numbers of TAFE campus closures and a 60 per cent drop in the number of TAFE providers in recent years.’⁷⁰
- 5.64 South West TAFE reported that ‘some of our big challenges in Victoria are around the contestable funding model’ and commented:
- It’s not so much the contestability of it; it’s the fact that it doesn’t really cover the full cost of delivering vocational education and training in regional and outer regional areas. Some of the University colleagues find that too. When you’re managing multiple campuses there are a lot of additional costs.⁷¹
- 5.65 The Western Australian government noted that there is ‘very limited access to training and tertiary education’ on the Ngaanyatjarra Lands, stating that:
- Currently there are no students undertaking formal vocational or tertiary courses. There is sporadic access to TAFE courses, which operate with the support of school personnel and are always short-term courses.⁷²
- 5.66 Cross jurisdictional issues were raised in the context of VET provision in the tri-border region. Empowered Communities Ngaanyatjarra
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67 South West TAFE, *Submission 54*, p. 7.

68 Western Australian government, *Submission 6*, p. 13.

69 Gunnedah Shire Council, *Submission 46*, p. 3.

70 The Australian Education Union (AEU), *Submission 43*, p. 15.

71 Dr John Flett, Executive Manager, Education, and Acting Manager, Strategic Projects, Grants and Research, South West TAFE, *Committee Hansard*, 26 August 2020, Canberra, p. 11.

72 Western Australian Government, *Submission 6*, p. 9.

Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (NPY) Region reported that Anangu living in South Australia can access VET while remaining in their communities, while those living nearby in Western Australia and the Northern Territory cannot:

Opportunities for traineeships, apprenticeships and vocational training are limited- with no TAFE or VET campuses outside of the APY Lands. Opportunities for Anangu to develop work readiness skills are also extremely limited and even simple things such as securing a drivers licence, first aid training or other certificates required for employment (such as lifeguard certificates or White Cards) are extremely challenging due to lack of training providers and transition support in the region.⁷³

5.67 Empowered Communities, NPY Region recommended 'an urgent investment in increased access to vocational training and structured school-to-work transition activities' in the NPY Lands.⁷⁴

5.68 Nomads Charitable and Educational Foundation (NCEF) reported that opportunities for secondary students to participate in VET in the Pilbara are limited:

Whilst individual units of competencies have been offered throughout the years, opportunities to complete whole certificates have not been forthcoming. Partnerships with regional TAFE providers have collapsed due to funding and human resourcing deficiencies. Small student numbers, limited funding, lack of staffing and qualified trainers, distances from TAFE and RTO providers, difficulties in accessing Abstudy, transportation issues, and the negative influences of regional towns have all been compounding issues which must be resolved.⁷⁵

5.69 The Western Australian government reported that there are a range of factors that limit access to career pathways, especially VET programs, for students from regional, rural and remote communities, including:

- access to TAFE colleges;
- availability of private training providers;
- availability of qualified trainers;
- distance from larger regional centres;
- availability of facilities that meet the training package requirements;

73 Empowered Communities Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (NPY) Region, *Submission 17*, p. 18.

74 Empowered Communities, NPY Region, *Submission 17*, p. 10.

75 Nomads Charitable and Educational Foundation (NCEF), *Submission 66*, p. 44.

- limited use of the flexibilities that are available through the use of technology (e.g. web-conferencing); and
- limited access to relevant and meaningful work experience.⁷⁶

5.70 There was support for measures to increase VET provision and participation in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.⁷⁷ For example, NACCHO suggested that:

more innovative services in the education and training sector may assist more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander job seekers, including school leavers, overcome...barriers and increase their readiness to pursue further education and training.⁷⁸

Better integration of VET with universities

5.71 South West TAFE advocated for a range of system wide changes that 'can improve education and job pathways', including:

- Better pathway models between TAFE and university that include automatic credit transfers for completion of a Certificate IV or Diploma qualification (for non-specific university units)
- Less duplication of qualification offerings between sectors at AQF⁷⁹ and 6 level to reduce market confusion and improve the viability of VET and TAFE programs
- Encouraging and enabling funding for university students to concurrently study relevant VET skills clusters or qualifications while undertaking HE [higher education] studies, and
- Encouraging and enabling funding for secondary students to concurrently study a wider range of relevant VET skills clusters or qualifications while undertaking school studies.⁸⁰

5.72 South West TAFE suggested that TAFE campuses could be better integrated with universities operating in regional areas:

With appropriate support and relationships with universities, regional TAFE campuses can become great a location from which broader educational precincts can be established. These may be structured as digital or study hubs where a number of universities

76 Western Australian Government, *Submission 6*, p. 13.

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

78 NACCHO, *Submission 44*, p. 6.

79 AQF levels are an indication of the relative complexity and/or depth of achievement and the autonomy required to demonstrate that achievement. AQF level 1 has the lowest complexity and AQF level 10 has the highest complexity. See: Australian Qualifications Framework, 'AQF Levels', <<https://www.aqf.edu.au/aqf-levels>>, accessed 21 August 2020.

80 South West TAFE, *Submission 54*, p. 12.

may offer online options that are augmented by onsite tutors and learner support services. The introduction of Regional Study Hubs or Regional University Centres is a welcome start but more of these need to be established in existing TAFE campuses where existing infrastructure can be leveraged and improvements and efficiencies made in the provision of learner support services.⁸¹

- 5.73 At the roundtable hearing on 26 August 2020, La Trobe noted that ‘one of the fears that a lot of regional students and their families have about higher education is the cost and the risk of not completing but leaving with a significant debt.’⁸² La Trobe said that it worked with regional TAFEs ‘to create pathways that had exit points at just about every stage – end of first year, end of second year – which completely de-risked the whole prospect of going on to post-secondary education.’⁸³ La Trobe commented:

It meant that students could get a valuable qualification no matter the point they departed, but they would also retain the option of going on to complete a full degree. That increased the transition rate from TAFE to higher education by about 400 per cent.⁸⁴

- 5.74 La Trobe said that the government should ‘sort out the relationship’ between VET and higher education, and commented:

It's partly because vocational and TAFE are state-based things, so there's not going to be a uniform national solution, but it needs someone to really take this on and drive a good integration of the two sectors. As I said before, of all of the things we've tried that's the one that seems to have the most potential to benefit students and to benefit communities because, by signposting students through what can be a bewildering maze of choice and financial imposts, we desperately need to find a better way of reaching the pathways and articulations between the two.⁸⁵

81 South West TAFE, *Submission 54*, p. 8.

82 Prof. John Dewar AO, Vice Chancellor, La Trobe, *Committee Hansard*, 26 August 2020, Canberra, p. 10.

83 Prof. John Dewar AO, Vice Chancellor, La Trobe, *Committee Hansard*, 26 August 2020, Canberra, p. 10.

84 Prof. John Dewar AO, Vice Chancellor, La Trobe, *Committee Hansard*, 26 August 2020, Canberra, p. 10.

85 Prof. John Dewar AO, Vice Chancellor, La Trobe, *Committee Hansard*, 26 August 2020, Canberra, p. 15.

Addressing skills shortages

- 5.75 The Napthine review noted that rural industries make a significant contribution to the Australian economy and highly skilled and flexible workers are needed to maximise the economic benefits of regional industries.⁸⁶ However, it was reported that there are significant skills shortages across all sectors of the regional economy.⁸⁷
- 5.76 The committee is aware of media reports suggesting that the travel bans imposed to contain the spread of COVID-19 have further exacerbated labour shortages in some regional economies.⁸⁸
- 5.77 Chapter 2 noted that there are currently skills shortages in the health, community, and disability sector in regional, rural and remote communities and that this growth is being driven by the implementation of the NDIS, the needs of an ageing population and increasing demand for childcare and home-based care services.⁸⁹
- 5.78 South West TAFE outlined a range of factors contributing to regional skills shortages:

The dearth of regionally available post-compulsory education is evidenced by the region's social demographic profile that shows far fewer people in the 18 to 29 year old age group. People leave looking for educational or employment pathways elsewhere and most do not return. This in turn is creating an ageing regional population with a low growth rate and chronic workforce shortages in the health and social assistance sectors and the food and fibre sectors.⁹⁰

- 5.79 Concerns were raised that a lack of relevant training in communities located near regional industries and sources of employment may be exacerbating skills shortages. For example, Gunnedah Shire Council reported that while agriculture is the biggest contributor to economic output in Gunnedah, 'there are no agricultural courses available at the local TAFE', and stated:

More alarmingly, where mining, fabrication and manufacturing are very significant employers in the district, the mining

86 Napthine review, *Final Report*, August 2019, p. 16.

87 Gunnedah Shire Council, *Submission 46*, p. 1.

88 J Hayes, "'Heartbreaking" decision sees orchardist pull out over 1,500 trees amid long-term labour shortage fears', *ABC Rural*, 9 September 2020, <<https://www.abc.net.au/news/rural/2020-09-09/orchard-labour-shortages-pulls-tree-in-heartbreaking-decision/12644302>>, accessed 25 September 2020.

89 ASU, *Submission 19*, pp. 6-7.

90 South West TAFE, *Submission 54*, p. 5.

companies are not utilising the local facility to deliver training courses. Whitehaven Coal operates four mines in the Gunnedah basin and has over forty apprentices predominately in electrical and heavy plant; they currently do not train any of their apprentices in Gunnedah due to the necessary courses not being offered.⁹¹

- 5.80 The Western Australian government reported a number of barriers to the take-up of apprenticeships and traineeships in regional and remote areas, including higher costs of living and travel, and a lack of training providers. It was also noted that there was a very low uptake of agricultural traineeships and that there are concerns around ensuring appropriate levels of supervision by agricultural enterprises.⁹²
- 5.81 The Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) called for Australian governments to 'promote locally available traineeships and training courses that are relevant to local industries and local employment prospects in remote areas.'⁹³
- 5.82 Similarly, the Town of Port Hedland commented:
- The focus on education approaches that retain and enhance the local skills base by delivering highly contextualised education aligned to employment opportunities, is key to ensuring that Port Hedland and other Pilbara towns are appropriately positioned to retain students in Town, meet new economic opportunities and be resilient during economic fluctuations.⁹⁴
- 5.83 Gunnedah Shire Council recommended that agriculture, automotive heavy plant, electro-technology and engineering be offered as apprentice courses as a minimum to meet the training needs of their economy.⁹⁵
- 5.84 Ms Julie Bailey suggested that locals in remote Indigenous communities need to be trained 'in simple trade skills to fix on going repair issues.' She considered that 'instead of having to wait for certified tradies to fix simple problems locals could be trained basic skills in plumbing, building, carpentry, painting, electrical, cementing and other tasks.'⁹⁶
- 5.85 Ms Bailey recommended that trade skills and certifications 'be adapted to a simplified a multi trade certificate relevant to the many jobs frequently

91 Gunnedah Shire Council, *Submission 46*, p. 3.

92 Western Australian government, *Submission 6*, p. 13.

93 The Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC), *Submission 1*, p. 34.

94 Town of Port Hedland, *Submission 58*, p. 9.

95 Gunnedah Shire Council, *Submission 46*, p. 3.

96 Ms Julie Bailey, *Submission 43*, p. 7.

required in remote Indigenous communities.’⁹⁷ She also recommended the government undertake ‘place-based collaboration with remote communities to adapt and deliver relevant courses’ using Interactive Distance Learning.⁹⁸

- 5.86 According to DESE, the Australian government is also investing \$50.6 million to trial Industry Training Hubs in ten regions across Australia. The ‘Industry Training Hubs aim to improve opportunities for young people in regions with high youth unemployment’ and will ‘work with and encourage young people to build skills and choose occupations in demand in their region.’⁹⁹
- 5.87 Training Hubs will be established in New South Wales (Grafton, Gosford), Victoria (Shepparton), Queensland (Maryborough, Townsville), Western Australia (Wanneroo, Armadale), South Australia (Port Pirie), Tasmania (Burnie), and the Northern Territory (Alice Springs).¹⁰⁰

Workforce issues

- 5.88 Consistent with skills shortages in other industries, it was reported there is a lack of qualified VET educators in rural, regional and remote communities and a high rate of staff turnover. For example, South West TAFE reported:

The availability of suitably qualified and experienced teachers in regional and rural areas is a major challenge, with wage differentials between industry, as well as more opportunities with metro and larger regional centres making talent attraction very difficult. The situation is further compounded by funding instability in the TAFE sector causing higher rates of casual and short term contract teachers. This in turn impacts on quality teaching, and workforce attraction and retention. Consideration for better financial packages that assist regional TAFEs in attracting teachers and non-teaching staff from industry and metropolitan areas and their long-term retention is warranted.¹⁰¹

- 5.89 Concerns were raised that VET qualification requirements may be contributing to staff shortages. Gunnedah Shire Council reported that the range of courses offered at Gunnedah TAFE are limited by a lack of qualified teachers:

97 Ms Julie Bailey, *Submission 43*, p. 7.

98 Ms Julie Bailey, *Submission 43*, p. 7.

99 The Department of Education, Skills and Employment (DESE), *Submission 49*, p. 39.

100 DESE, *Submission 49*, p. 39.

101 South West TAFE, *Submission 54*, p. 9.

A recent change in the qualification requirements for TAFE teachers has put a strain on the Gunnedah campus and has meant that a key course, electro-technology, is not being offered in 2020 despite significant investment in the infrastructure in this area. The fact that there is no suitably qualified teachers meant that TAFE Gunnedah were not even able to advertise the course in Semester one 2020.¹⁰²

5.90 Similarly, South West TAFE commented:

Compounding the difficulties with providing a qualified and experienced teaching workforce in rural and remote regions is the shortage of experienced industry people who hold a current TAFE teaching qualification, a factor that is contributed to by the continued changes to qualification's requirements. Unlike most other educational jurisdictions VET teacher qualifications need to be fully updated every few years.¹⁰³

Student support

5.91 The Halsey review described the transition from school to further study, training and employment as 'a major event for a young person and their family' and noted:

For many who live in rural, regional and remote areas, this stage of life can be particularly challenging (as well as highly rewarding) because it often involves having to move away from home, family, friends and the familiarity and support of a community.¹⁰⁴

5.92 A range of stakeholders reported that students from regional, rural and remote communities require more support in order to increase further education participation and attainment.¹⁰⁵ For example, CSU reported:

Students from regional and especially remote areas face greater cost barriers to higher education than their counterparts in metropolitan areas, especially in the form of long travel times or, for remote area students who want to study on-campus, the

102 Gunnedah Shire Council, *Submission 46*, p. 3.

103 South West TAFE, *Submission 54*, p. 9.

104 Emeritus Professor John Halsey, Department of Education and Training, *Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education*, January 2018, p. 22.

105 Western Australian government, *Submission 6*, p. 6; Newcastle Anglican Schools, *Submission 55*, p. 1; South West TAFE, *Submission 54*, p. 7; ICPA Australia, *Submission 7*, p. 4; ICPA Qld, *Submission 4*, p. 4; The Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations and the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Postgraduate Association, *Submission 18*, p. 4.

expense of relocating closer to a university. When these costs come on top of the accommodation and day-to-day living expenses all students have to deal with, the total can be the factor that deters them from university study.¹⁰⁶

5.93 To help support regional and remote students with the costs associated with further education, the Government introduced the Rural and Regional Enterprise Scholarships program in 2016. The scholarships are for up to \$18,000 each and are for students studying at undergraduate or postgraduate levels, VET students from Certificate IV and PhD candidates.¹⁰⁷ On 12 November 2018, the Hon Dan Tehan MP, Minister for Education, announced an expansion of the program, increasing the number of scholarships available from 1,200 to 3,155 and opening the scholarship to all fields of study.¹⁰⁸

5.94 The Western Australian government reported it is working with universities to explore ways to encourage young people in the regions to aspire to university education. For example:

The Western Australian Government has committed to invest \$550 000 into establishing the new Pilbara Universities Centre, a not-for-profit education support service for current and aspiring students undertaking university education within the Pilbara region.' The Centre will provide 'a learning environment through which students gain access to educational support, application and enrolment assistance, guidance on courses and pathways, connections with local industry, comfortable and modern facilities in which to study and connect with other students, as well as administrative and student support.'¹⁰⁹

Summary and discussion

5.95 Key issues examined in this chapter are:

- factors limiting the participation of Australians from regional, rural and remote communities in higher education include:
 - ⇒ a lack of aspiration and awareness of further education and career options, and

106 CSU, *Submission 41*, p. 3.

107 DESE, *Submission 49*, p. 43.

108 DESE, *Submission 49*, p. 43.

109 Western Australian government, *Submission 6*, p. 7.

⇒ there are fewer opportunities to train or study close to home, meaning that students often need to relocate for work or study, resulting in additional costs such as travel and accommodation and the need for better access to support services.

- online delivery of further education has the potential to bridge gaps in access and equity in regional, rural and remote locations, however this is dependent on affordable and reliable access to high speed broadband
- there are higher costs associated with both higher education and VET provision in regional, rural and remote communities and a range of other issues including staffing shortages and funding difficulties
- VETiS provides an important pathway for school students to undertake a nationally recognised VET qualification while completing their school certificate, however there is uneven provision of VETiS due to funding issues and agreements needing to be negotiated between individual schools and RTOs
- barriers to VET provision includes geographical remoteness and the capacity of RTOs to service remote communities; issues with transport and licensing, low literacy and numeracy, and thin markets, and
- a range of skills shortages were reported in regional, rural and remote industries including in the delivery of further education, the health, community, and disability sector, and agriculture, automotive heavy plant, electro-technology and engineering.

5.96 There was support for:

- strategies to build student aspiration, including better advice about options for further education and careers
- better access to financial and other supports to assist students from regional, rural and remote communities to relocate to take up further education and employment opportunities
- an increase in the number of Commonwealth-funded university places offered to regional, rural and remote students
- an increase in the provision of VETiS in regional, rural and remote schools, including addressing funding gaps and better coordination between RTOs and schools to delivery these programs
- an increase in the number of regional study hubs
- streamlining of qualifications between the higher education and VET systems and more flexibility for students to undertake university and VET courses concurrently
- an increase in financial support for higher education providers and RTOs in regional, rural and remote areas, and

- strategies that ensure that workers who already live in regional, rural and remote communities are trained to fill skills shortages in growth industries in those areas

Relevant Halsey review recommendation

5.97 The Halsey review made one recommendation relevant to the issues examined in this chapter and encouraged a range of actions to progress the recommendation. As previously noted, the government did not detail how or whether it would implement all the actions to progress the recommendations provided in the Halsey review.¹¹⁰

5.98 Recommendation 6 related to supporting the transition of students from school to further education and employment:

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

Actions to progress this recommendation:

- review current government income support policies and arrangements for RRR students from low income families who must move away from home to take up further study or training, to ensure they are able to commence immediately following school completion
- ensure that RRR schools can offer students and parents high quality career information and advice to grow aspirations and employment opportunities
- ensure schools or clusters of schools have access to dedicated personnel to case manage students at risk of not making a successful transition to further study, training, employment or combinations of them
- provide additional financial support to students and/or families for travel between university and home, in particular in a student's first year of study
- establish dedicated RRR accommodation advisers and brokers in all states and territories
- require universities to prioritise beds and clearly identify accommodation support for RRR students, especially those coming from remote areas and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students
- improve the provision of accommodation and income support information for RRR students.¹¹¹

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

111 Emeritus Professor John Halsey, Department of Education and Training, *Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education* (Halsey review) January 2018, p. 64.

5.99 In its response, the government indicated its support for this recommendation, noting that it ‘will continue to provide programs and initiatives that support young people move from school to further education, training, or work.’¹¹² It provided the following examples of current initiatives supporting students to transition from school to further education and work:

- the Preparing Secondary Students for Work framework, a new high level National Career Education Strategy in 2018
- the Pathways in Technology (P-TECH) pilots
- the \$1.5 billion Skilling Australians Fund
- JobActive
- Transition to Work Program,
- Parents Next program
- Youth Jobs PaTH
- the National Work Experience Program, and
- the Regional and Rural Enterprise Scholarships Program.¹¹³

5.100 The Government stated it ‘will investigate further improvements for online information for career advisers and students regarding post-school options’, noting that the Job Jumpstart and Job Outlook websites are available to assist young people to find work and make decisions about study, training and employment.¹¹⁴

5.101 The Government noted:

There are numerous Government support options available to regional, rural and remote students who are making the transition to tertiary education. Youth Allowance, Austudy, and ABSTUDY all provide a fortnightly income for those eligible. Students receiving these payments may also be eligible for Commonwealth Rent Assistance, Student Start-up Loans and Relocation Scholarships.

The government also provides Rural and Regional Enterprise Scholarships. Additionally, the majority of universities offer

112 Department of Education and Training, *Australian Government Response to the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education*, 30 May 2018, p. 13.

113 Department of Education and Training, *Australian Government Response to the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education*, 30 May 2018, p. 13.

114 Department of Education and Training, *Australian Government Response to the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education*, 30 May 2018, p. 13.

scholarships and bursaries which are available to regional rural and remote students.¹¹⁵

5.102 The Government also said it would improve regional students' access to Youth Allowance by:

- relaxing the Youth Allowance workforce participation independence criteria for students from regional, rural or remote areas who must move away from home to study, and
- lifting the parental income cut-off for the workforce participation independence criterion, noting that 'it is expected the number of regional students who qualify for Youth Allowance under this criterion will increase by 75 per cent due to these reforms.'¹¹⁶

Napthine review recommendations

5.103 The Napthine review made seven recommendations and proposed 33 related actions to improve tertiary education participation and outcomes for students from regional, rural and remote areas:

- Recommendation one: Improve access to tertiary study options for students in RRR areas by:
 - ⇒ providing demand-driven funding for university places in regional areas
 - ⇒ exploring new higher education offerings focused on professional skills development
 - ⇒ expanding access to Regional Study Hubs
 - ⇒ addressing problems with student access to affordable, reliable, high speed internet services, and
 - ⇒ improving access to high quality VET programs in RRR areas.
- Recommendation two: Improve access to financial support, to support greater fairness and more equal opportunity by:
 - ⇒ introducing a new tertiary education access payment for students who relocate for study from an outer regional or remote area
 - ⇒ allowing greater flexibility in pathways to qualify for independent Youth Allowance

115 Department of Education and Training, *Australian Government Response to the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education*, 30 May 2018, p. 13.

116 Department of Education and Training, *Australian Government Response to the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education*, 30 May 2018, p. 14.

- ⇒ providing greater assistance to students and families to meet costs associated with travel to and from their home communities, and
- ⇒ promoting and improving the clarity of online information about available financial support.
- Recommendation three: Improve the quality and range of student support services for RRR students to address the challenges of transition and higher rates of attrition by:
 - ⇒ identifying and disseminating information on best practice student support services
 - ⇒ introducing new requirements for providers to publish transparent information on available service offerings, and
 - ⇒ working with state and territory governments to improve transport options for students.
- Recommendation four: Build aspiration, improve career advice and strengthen RRR schools to better prepare RRR students for success by:
 - ⇒ implementing a regionally-based model for independent, professional career advice
 - ⇒ improving online career related information and advice
 - ⇒ establishing aspiration-raising initiatives covering both VET and higher education
 - ⇒ expanding access to high quality VET programs in RRR schools
 - ⇒ undertaking further work to improve RRR schools and Year 12 completion rates, and
 - ⇒ improving support available to teachers, principals and school leaders.
- Recommendation five: Improve participation and outcomes for RRR students from equity groups including low SES students, Indigenous students, students with disability and remote students by:
 - ⇒ modifying the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) to better target funding to cost effective RRR programs
 - ⇒ providing demand-driven funding for RRR Indigenous university students, and
 - ⇒ establishing tailored initiatives for equity groups and those experiencing hardship.
- Recommendation six: Strengthen the role of tertiary education providers in regional development and grow Australia's regions by:

- ⇒ increasing the research capacity of regional universities including identifying opportunities to establish research infrastructure
- ⇒ continuing to explore strategies to attract domestic and international students, and
- ⇒ increasing opportunities to undertake work integrated learning in RRR areas.

The Advisory Group's seventh recommendation is related to implementing and monitoring the Strategy:

- Recommendation seven: Establish mechanisms to coordinate the implementation effort and support monitoring of the Strategy by:
 - ⇒ establishing an RRR Education Commissioner, with a broad remit in relation to RRR education matters, and
 - ⇒ developing an improved geographical classification tool for tertiary education purposes.¹¹⁷

5.104 On 19 June 2020, Minister Tehan announced a number of key initiatives in response to the recommendations of the Napthine including:

- a \$5000 Tertiary Access Payment for regional students
- an increase in Commonwealth Grant Scheme funding for regional university campuses
- establishing a Regional Education Commissioner
- strengthening and expanding the Regional University Centres program
- enabling Indigenous students from regional and remote areas to access demand-driven Commonwealth-supported university places.
- enhancing the research capacity of regional universities, and
- improving Fares Allowance to reduce the waiting time for first-year payment to support students to visit home during their mid-year break.¹¹⁸

5.105 These new initiatives will commence from 2021.¹¹⁹

Relevant Closing the Gap targets

5.106 In relation to further education, training and transitions to employment, the Closing the Gap agreement includes targets to:

117 Napthine review, *Final Report*, August 2019, pp. 6-7.

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

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

- increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 25-34 years who have completed a tertiary qualification (Certificate III and above) to 70 per cent, and
- increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth (15-24 years) who are in employment, education or training to 67 per cent, by 2031.¹²⁰

Conclusion

- 5.107 The committee has noted significant work is underway to respond to the findings and recommendations of various policy reviews and that the government has made a number of announcements in response to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The committee anticipates that further updates are likely in the coming months, but is concerned by a lack of clarity about the implementation of specific actions recommended by the Halsey and Napthine reviews.
- 5.108 Evidence to this inquiry supports the findings of both the Halsey and Napthine reviews. The recommendations and reform actions provided by the Halsey and Napthine reviews are current, detailed and comprehensive, and the committee does not seek to duplicate the findings of these reviews.
- 5.109 In the previous chapter, the committee recommended that the government provide a comprehensive implementation plan to show how it is responding to the recommendations and actions outlined in the Halsey review. The committee similarly recommends the government provide a comprehensive implementation plan for the Napthine review.

Recommendation 12

- 5.110 **The committee recommends that, by May 2021, the Minister for Education publish a comprehensive implementation plan for the recommendations and actions outlined in the National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy (Napthine review).**
- 5.111 The committee is aware that universities are experiencing a significant period of disruption as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic and the reduction in international students will have a financial impact on

¹²⁰ 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, pp. 22-3.

universities, particularly at regional universities where the cost of delivering higher education is comparatively higher.

- 5.112 It is expected that there will be increased domestic demand for higher education in the coming years as a consequence of COVID-19.
- 5.113 The committee notes that the Higher Education Support Amendment (Job-Ready Graduates and Supporting Regional and Remote Students) Bill 2020 has the support of the House and is currently before the Senate. Under the Job Ready Graduates Package, 'University students who study in areas of expected employment growth will pay less for their degree as the Government incentivises students to make more job-relevant decisions about their education.'¹²¹ The Morrison Government 'will provide an additional 39,000 university places by 2023 to meet the expected increase in demand because of COVID-19.'¹²² However, the Committee also notes regional universities requested the additional places be rolled out fast enough to meet demand.
- 5.114 The committee calls on the Minister for Education to consider key Napthine review recommendations, which would provide funding of university places in regional areas to ensure that regional students with the required pre-COVID19 entrance scores do not miss out on places next year.
- 5.115 The committee will continue to monitor these developments.

Recommendation 13

- 5.116 **The committee recommends that the Minister for Education, as soon as practicably possible, consider evidence as to whether the regional loading to address the higher cost of delivering higher education at regional universities sufficiently recognises the higher costs.**
- 5.117 There are significant potential benefits associated with improving the integration of the VET and university sectors, including better pathways for students moving between the VET and higher education systems, and more flexibility to allow students to undertake VET and university studies concurrently.

121 Minister for Education, The Hon. Dan Tehan MP, and Minister for Employment, Skills, Small and Family Business, Senator the Hon. Michaelia Cash, 'Job-ready graduates to power economic recovery', *Joint Media Release*, 19 June 2020.

122 Minister for Education, The Hon. Dan Tehan MP, and Minister for Employment, Skills, Small and Family Business, Senator the Hon. Michaelia Cash, 'Job-ready graduates to power economic recovery', *Joint Media Release*, 19 June 2020.

Recommendation 14

- 5.118 **The committee recommends the Minister for Education develop a proposal for the Education Council to consider implementing in 2021 to enhance the integration of Australia's Vocation Education and Training and Higher Education sectors.**

Mr Andrew Laming MP

Chair

27 October 2020