

Education in rural Australia

Naomi Godden, On Line Opinion, posted Tuesday, 27 May 2008

There are ten authors responsible for this article. They participated in the Rural Industries and Rural Communities stream at the Australia 2020 Summit. They are rural leaders in their respective fields and are: Naomi Godden - Social worker and social researcher; Dr James Fitzpatrick - Paediatrician; Professor Margaret Alston - Professor of Social Work; Mary Nenke - Broadacre farmer and aquaculturalist; Professor Bob Lonne - Professor of Social Work; Karen Morrissey OAM - Pastoralist, educator; Ken Boundy - Remote small business owner; Jacquie Stutt - Youth Development; and Professor Fiona McKenzie - Director of Housing and Urban Research Institute, Curtin University; and John McQuilten - retired MLC, Victoria Government.

Remote, rural and regional Australians experience human rights concerns accessing quality education. Rural participation, retention and achievement in education are far below urban Australia. Yet education is the pathway to opportunity and productivity for disadvantaged people and communities. The recent Federal budget provided some positive steps towards addressing education concerns in rural Australia, but much more is needed.

A collaborative proposal was developed by ten members of the Rural Industries and Rural Communities stream at the Australia 2020 Summit. It collates ideas from the summit, and demands that education is prioritised for rural revitalisation, sustainability and productivity. The proposal ensures that all rural Australians can access their human right to education, and promotes rural social inclusion. Our initiative embraces our long-term, 2020 vision for rural Australia:

By 2020, all rural Australians will have equitable access to quality education and training opportunities. These opportunities will encompass: community-based early childhood learning; primary and secondary education; vocational education and training; higher education; online learning; professional development; and lifelong learning.

This proposal intends to increase the skills, knowledge, opportunities, capacity and productivity of rural Australians, and ensure parity of educational opportunities between rural and urban Australians from “the cradle to the grave” It will increase participation, retention and achievement of rural Australians in education, and address the rural skills shortage and support rural population growth.

The following key strategies will ensure rural access to, and equity and excellence in, the Education Revolution:

A “national voice” for rural education

We need a “national voice” for remote, rural and regional education. A funded peak body will ensure rural education is equitably represented in education policy development and decision-making. The peak body will include education providers, recipients, and associated groups, building upon the current Rural Education Forum Australia model.

National rural education strategy

A national rural education strategy will provide a collaborative policy framework that embraces early childhood education through to adult learning for all remote, rural and regional Australians. It will ensure that no rural Australian is left behind.

Flexible and online learning opportunities

Many rural students cannot access specialised educational courses in rural communities. Funding and support is required to develop and expand primary, secondary, TAFE and higher education online courses. This strategy also encourages rural young people to complete their education in rural communities.

Satellite Education Centres with high tech, high speed communications

The current shortage of teachers impacts highest on remote, rural and regional education. Sending students to cities and regional centres for quality education should not be our only option. This strategy proposes “state of the art” education centres as the hub of towns, with the highest quality teachers zoomed in online. Teaching would be interactive, innovative, exciting and of the highest quality, while maintaining the presence of face-to-face teaching; similar to Rural Clinical Schools for medicine students. These centres will also encourage metropolitan Australians to relocate to rural Australia for their education.

Non-means tested Youth Allowance and Tertiary Access Allowance for all rural tertiary students

Many remote, rural and regional young people must relocate to an urban or regional centre for tertiary education, and encounter considerable costs (recent research estimated expenses of \$15,000-\$20,000 per year, plus up to \$6,000 for start-up costs). Eligibility criteria for Youth Allowance marginalise rural Australians, create a financial barrier to tertiary education, and force many rural families to relocate to urban centres for education. This strategy removes the financial barrier.

All rural young people will be eligible for Youth Allowance if they must leave home for tertiary education. Rural students will also receive a non-means tested Tertiary Access Allowance for their start-up and relocation costs. Tertiary education will become a viable option for all rural young people.

Commonwealth Scholarships for TAFE and other post-secondary students

Currently, Commonwealth Scholarships are only provided for higher education students. However, rural young people who leave home for TAFE and other post-secondary courses also encounter high costs (TAFE students must also pay up-front fees). Extending Commonwealth Scholarships for vocational post-secondary students will ensure equitable financial support.

Mentoring a Rural Renaissance

A national mentoring program will bridge urban and rural Australia. Rural young people will be linked to rural and/or urban mentors to learn life skills. Rural tertiary students and trainees will have mentors to guide career pathways. Rural professionals and business-people will have mentors to share information and ideas, and for professional development (including for rural teachers).

The strategy also includes a school buddy system connecting rural and urban schools, and rural student exchanges. The initiative reconnects rural and urban Australia, promotes rural communities, and empowers rural young people to develop relationships with urban peers.

Funded rural work experience programs

Rural student placements are expensive and therefore inaccessible for many students. This strategy involves funded work experience and placements for urban and rural secondary and tertiary students to have on-the-job training in rural communities. This aims to address the rural skills shortage through promoting rural career opportunities.

Waive HECS-HELP debts for rural practitioners

The strategy provides incentives for rural and urban young people to participate in tertiary education, and to bring their skills to remote, rural or regional communities. This strategy will recruit and retain a rural population and a sustainable workforce. It also ensures that rural Australians can equitably access education, health, social care and other services.

Indigenous education

Many Indigenous education ideas were developed in the Indigenous stream at the 2020 summit. Since many Indigenous children live in rural areas, their issues are similarly rural education issues and not necessarily isolated to just Indigenous students. The 2020 ideas include: an education framework giving real choice for Indigenous children to access high quality education; encouraging high-performing young professionals to work as teachers alongside Indigenous educators; and other ideas.

Other issues for consideration

Some important rural education issues were not able to be discussed at the 2020 Summit, including: increased funding for regional universities; expanding Assistance for Isolated Children eligibility to facilitate choice in education for remote children; educating rural students with a disability; educating migrant and refugee peoples in rural communities; and access and excellence in education for rural women.

Improving rural access to quality education will improve rural socio-economic status, health and wellbeing, industries and economy, self-esteem and the capacity of rural communities to thrive. Education is integral to remote, rural and regional human rights concerns and central to rural revitalisation, sustainability and productivity. Education is the key to Rural Australia and so Australia's future. We must work together to ensure education is accessible, equitable, and of excellent quality for all rural Australians. Our nation depends on it.