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To the Regional Education Expert Advisory Group,

The Australian Technology Network of Universities (ATN) would like to thank the Regional Education Expert Advisory Group for the opportunity to comment on the "National Regional, Rural and Remote Education Strategy Framing Paper".

The ATN is a national collaborative group of four major Australian universities: University of Technology Sydney, RMIT University, University of South Australia and Curtin University. The ATN firmly believes that a sustainable, accessible, quality education and research system are core to Australia's long-term prosperity and societal wellbeing.

While the ATN universities are based in city centres, the ATN believes that all students should have the opportunity to study at the institution of their choice. ATN universities proudly support students from all backgrounds, no matter how diverse, to succeed in their studies. As of 2017, the ATN educates 11 per cent of Australian students from regional, rural and remote areas. The ATN believes that universities should be encouraged and incentivised to meet and support the needs of regional, rural and remote students. Universities nor students should be punished for their geographical locations, rather both should be supported to meet high quality educational outcomes. ATN universities have a strong commitment to ensuring that all students are supported throughout their studies and have dedicated programs to enable students from underrepresented backgrounds to succeed with their ambitions of higher education endeavour.

It is important that Australia's higher education system remains diverse, offering students a variety of educational opportunities, recognising that not every student wishes to study the same course or content in the same location. By retaining a diverse offering of courses, universities in Australia provide opportunities to meet the unique needs of individual students who are pursuing higher education. As such the ATN recommends that all universities are adequately supported both in policy and financial environments to continue providing opportunities and support to underrepresented cohorts.

Challenge A: There are fewer study options available in regional, rural and remote areas

While there are undoubtedly fewer university campuses located in regional, rural and remote parts of Australia, there exist substantial opportunities for students living in these areas to engage in a tertiary education. ATN universities are proactively developing innovative delivery methods for higher education course provision. Examples of this include collaborative high-end video conferencing and intensive block teaching. Furthermore, the use of university study centres, such as the Geraldton Universities Centre and Pilbara Universities Centre provide opportunities for students in regional and remote Australia to engage with universities.

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There are numerous opportunities for further collaboration between universities and VET providers in rural, regional and remote Australia. ATN universities are actively seeking to establish and promote articulation pathways with rural, regional and remote VET partners. An example of this is Curtin University's Regional TAFE Articulation Agreements which applies to all regional TAFEs in Western Australia. In addition to this agreement being in place, Curtin University continues to engage in dialogue with their regional partners to ensure that students fully understand the opportunities the agreement provides.

Challenge B: Relocating regional, rural and remote students face significant financial, emotional and social challenges

ATN universities are cognisant of the challenges facing regional, rural and remote students who chose to relocate to engage in higher education. These challenges include:

- Financial constraints
- Homesickness
- Culture shock

To assist regional, rural and remote students in their transition to university, ATN universities provide many forms of support to both on campus and online students. ATN universities first identify the student cohort through advanced analytics of student enrolment data. For example, the University of South Australia has a suite of both student and staff facing dashboards. These dashboards utilise learning analytics and are obtained through the university's learning management system. Academic staff use the dashboards as a means of identifying students who are considered to be academically 'at risk' early in a course, or within a program. The analytics help staff recognise where there are individual students who are consistently not accessing the system, or not engaging with the course learning materials, or where a student's pattern of engagement has varied over a course. This enables tailored support to be put in place to enhance students' success.

ATN universities offer a wide range of activities to support regional, rural and remote students in their studies. These include:

- Regional, rural and remote student scholarships (including upfront financial payments to assist in covering the significant cost of relocation)
- Ongoing support in providing counselling and student wellbeing services
- Financial advice
- Specialised employment opportunities and career advice services
- Peer mentoring – pairing students where possible regional, rural and remote student mentors
- Encouragirng participation in campus events, clubs, groups and volunteering
- Travel bursaries for students and or family members to return home if studying at metropolitan campuses
- Technology, software and hardware, support.

The University of Technology Sydney's HEPPP funded program "Enhancing Computer Access program (ECAP)" assists domestic students on a Centrelink benefit or an assessed low income with course-related software, hardware, mobile broadband internet and printer costs. The program

updates any course technology requirements each year. ECAP aims to increase the probability of 'retention and success' by assisting target groups and disadvantaged students with laptop/hardware and software technology requirements for their course-work studies and study-groups, allowing for an equal platform for the same opportunities to succeed in their studies. 58 per cent of the Indigenous students UTS assisted with technology hardware and software in 2016 were from regional/rural/remote areas, completing a distance learning Bachelor of Business Administration. For these first-year students who received a laptop and software assistance for their studies, with the exception of one student, all other students completed a full subject load for 2016 and 98 per cent of students received a pass or higher.

ATN universities also provide scholarships for regional, rural and remote students which are not too prescriptive in how they are used, allowing the students to utilise the funds to address their most pressing needs.

For online regional, rural and remote students ATN universities provide opportunities within the nearest community for student meet ups (including those students who are studying at other universities), and to meet with potential employers. Additionally, ATN universities have dedicated mentoring programs for online students and have developed targeted digital communications, engagement and support services (including targeted online student orientations programs).

Challenge C: Raising aspirations for tertiary education

Raising aspirations for tertiary education is an incredibly important part of ensuring that regional, rural and remote students engage with tertiary education. There are certain actions that could be taken to help raise aspirations and ensure that regional, rural and remote students are adequately informed of their options and career choices. First and foremost, ensuring that secondary schools have access to a qualified secondary school careers counsellor who is equipped with the latest information and knowledge around pathways and university courses is a must. Furthermore, providing dedicated funding streams to support and grow aspiration outreach programs would assist in ensuring aspirations of regional, remote and rural students are met. Additional funding would assist the provision of in-class support, workshops, offering of ongoing support (self-directed and team-based learning, mentoring and advising), and increased use of high-quality learning analytics. This funding would also assist in the support of on-campus experiences for students from years seven to 12.

Challenge D: Regional, rural and remote students often experience multiple forms of disadvantage

Being aware of the students who are impacted by multiple forms of disadvantage is paramount to ensuring that these students are adequately supported in making their choices to study at university, transition to study and during their studies. The ATN would like to emphasise that such forms of disadvantage have a compounding effect for students. While socio-economic disadvantage is a critical factor, the intersectional nature of compounding disadvantages creates complex challenges. For example, indigenous students in remote areas and women in sole parent households in rural, regional or remote locations face compounding levels of disadvantage. For these students, it is vital that universities are supported to engage with these students across the entire student life cycle.

To ensure that Indigenous students from regional, rural and remote areas are adequately supported university and government policy needs to account for cultural considerations which can impact their time at university. An example of this is supporting students who have moved off country and need to return of cultural reasons. Universities need to be adequately funded to provide specific support and enrichment programs by their dedicated Indigenous Education Units including the creation of 'culturally safe spaces' and targeted mentoring programs.

Challenge E: Attracting people and jobs to regional, rural and remote areas

One potential way to highlight the opportunities that exist in regional, rural and remote areas would be to increase the support for universities to provide Work Integrated Learning opportunities in these areas. This would require financial support, not only for universities to identify the opportunities but also to support students required to stay or travel to these Work Integrated Learning locations. The support for universities could involve Government assistance in cultivating partnerships with groups, organisations and industry in regional, rural and remote Australia to create valuable learning and enrichment opportunities for students.

Challenge F: Implementing and monitoring a national strategy

The ATN does not believe there is value in establishing a National Regional Education Commissioner. There has not been a valid case built in the strategy framing paper for the Commissioner. Further, it remains unclear the nature of the Commissioner role. Without further information provided about the Commissioner role, that ATN would not be supportive of establishing the role.

Regarding measuring success; success depends upon the purpose the strategy sets out to solve. If the strategy is aiming to solve tertiary education participation and attainment by students who come from regional, rural and remote Australia, then the metrics and measures of success would look different to metrics of success if the strategy is aiming to solve delivery of tertiary education in regional, rural and remote Australia. The strategy framing paper does not clearly articulate the problem the strategy is attempting to solve. The ATN would be more than happy to engage with the Expert Advisory Group to discuss potential success metrics further as needed.

The ATN wishes to reiterate our belief that all students should have the opportunity to study at the institution of their choice and that universities should be encouraged and incentivised to meet and support the needs of regional, rural and remote students. Universities nor students should be disadvantaged for their geographical locations, rather both should be supported to meet high quality educational outcomes.

Please do not hesitate to contact the ATN Directorate on (02) 5105 6740 or via e-mail at info@atn.edu.au to discuss any elements of the submission further.

Yours sincerely,

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