

12 September 2025

Dr Catherine de Fontenay
Commissioner
Productivity Commission
GPO Box 1428
CANBERRA CITY ACT 2601

By email: 5pillars@pc.gov.au

Dear Commissioner

Re: Building a Skilled and Adaptable Workforce interim report

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the Productivity Commission Inquiry into Building a Skilled and Adaptable Workforce interim report.

As Regional Education Commissioner, I advocate for people from our regions at all education levels from early childhood through school, vocational education and training (VET) and higher education, as well as those transitioning from education into the workforce.

My comments below focus on regional, rural and remote communities, drawing on the findings in my previous annual reports, many conversations with people in the regions, and decades of living and working in regional Australia. I have provided my response against two of the key areas set out in the interim report.

Improving regional, rural and remote school student outcomes

Relevant curriculum

The proposed recommendation to centralise curriculum materials through a single national platform (Draft recommendation 1.1) could assist in managing regional teacher workload - but it should not be a one-size-fits-all approach.

In consultations with stakeholders, I have heard that current standardised approaches to curriculum and testing can disadvantage regional students by not providing examples that align with the student's experiences and local context. This is supported by research which has found that adapting educational materials to students' cultural context will noticeably improve educational outcomes.¹ For example, if students are unfamiliar with the example used in questions, it can hinder their own ability to demonstrate a skilled that is being tested, such as having to write about a beach when you have never been to one.² Teachers should be able to easily adapt resources to suit the regional context of their local communities. This cannot be achieved by AI (which only works for homogenous circumstances) or from a national pool of resources.

In addition to providing materials that can be adapted by local teachers, I encourage the Productivity Commission, as part of their final report, to consider how improving the diversity of examples in publicly available resources and standardised tests such as the NAPLAN would allow regional students to apply their knowledge to familiar environments without requiring teachers to modify the material.

¹ Roberts, P et al, [Cultural Context in Standardised Tests](#), UNSW Economics of Education Knowledge, 12 December 2021

² Roberts, P, [Australian students in rural areas are not 'behind' their city peers because of socioeconomic status. There is something else going on](#) The Conversation, 6 June 2023.

Career education resources on a national platform

Nurturing student aspiration and building confidence is vital to ensure a skilled and adaptable regional workforce in the future.

I have consistently heard from people in the regions that regional students do not lack aspiration, however they might not have the knowledge or confidence they need to pursue their goals. Providing high-quality careers advice to students as early as possible, from primary school onwards, is critical to helping regional, rural and remote students understand options for their future pathways, to nurture their aspirations and to build a skilled and adaptable regional workforce. Unfortunately, career education is not mandated in the national curriculum and is delivered inconsistently across schools in regional, rural and remote areas.

Improving the availability of career education resources would make a significant difference to nurturing aspiration in regional, rural and remote students, particularly where their school does not have a specialist careers advisor, by supporting local teachers to provide an informed and consistent level of advice to their students.

I encourage the Productivity Commission, as part of their final report, to consider recommending career education resources be included as part of any national platform.

Access to secondary subjects

Certain tertiary qualifications require completion of pre-requisite subjects in secondary school, particularly for medicine, nursing, veterinary science and engineering. However, due to a lack of specialist teachers in the regions, as well as small cohort sizes, regional, rural and remote schools generally offer their students a smaller range of secondary subjects than are available to students at metropolitan schools. Regional students need to be able to access a broader range of secondary subjects to be able to fulfil their aspirations and access more opportunities.

Many regional, rural and remote schools that are not large enough to employ specialist teachers, or have workforce shortages, are responding to this critical issue in creative ways. For example, secondary schools in South Australia's Eyre Peninsula have developed a 'cluster' model that allows students to access subjects not available at their local school by enrolling virtually with a linked school that does provide them.

I encourage the Productivity Commission, as part of their final report, to consider how regional, rural and remote schools can be supported to increase access for their students to a broad range of secondary subjects.

Out-of-field teaching

As the interim report notes, out-of-field teaching is a persistent issue within regional, rural and remote communities due to workforce shortages.³ People across our regions, from school representatives to teachers, parents and students, to local councils and community groups, have also told me that there is a particular shortage for specialisations such as Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) teachers. In regional, rural and remote areas, in 2020, 23 per cent of regional or remote teachers were teaching maths out-of-field.⁴

Providing curriculum materials for STEM subjects through a national platform could assist those teachers that are required to teach out-of-field due to local workforce shortages. However, there should also be increased efforts to upskill local teachers in these subjects through subsidised

³ Productivity Commission, Building a skilled and adaptable workforce, Interim report, Canberra, August 2025, 12, [Interim report - Building a skilled and adaptable workforce](#)

⁴ Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, ATWD Key Metrics Dashboard, Out-of-field teaching, by remoteness (KLA), Mathematics/ Regional or Remote filters, ATWD 2023, Teacher Survey (2018-2022) [Key metrics dashboard](#) (aitsl.edu.au)

training. This would contribute to a long-term and sustainable solution to workforce shortages. For example, pilot courses in the Australian Government's Microcredentials Pilot in Higher Education program, such as Southern Cross University's new 'Postgraduate Certificate in Teaching Mathematics for Out-Of-Field Teachers', show great potential to develop the skills of those teachers teaching out-of-field.

In addition to upskilling local teachers, employment-based teacher pathway programs and teaching scholarships can assist regional, rural and remote people to train as specialist teachers. For example, the Commonwealth Teaching Scholarships program provides up to \$40,000 in financial support to its recipients, including a top up payment of \$2,000 for scholarship recipients who undertake their final year of study in a remote area.

I encourage the Productivity Commission, as part of their final report, to consider targeted efforts to support local existing and prospective teachers to upskill in specialist areas to reduce out-of-field teaching.

Building skills and qualifications for a more productive workforce

Homegrowing a stronger regional workforce

It is expected that more than 90 per cent of new jobs over the next decade will require post-secondary qualifications.⁵ To meet the regional workforce needs of the future, more students from regional, rural and remote Australia will be required to complete tertiary education.

Whilst skills shortages are a reality of the Australian economy across the country, the persistent skills shortages facing the regional and remote workforce are critical. These regional workforce shortages, particularly in essential services like medicine, health, or education have significant impacts on regional economies and communities.

Although incentives and workforce attraction measures can be effective, an additional way to address regional workforce shortages is to develop a robust pipeline of 'homegrown' graduates. Research has shown that students who attend a regional school and who go on to attend a regional university are more likely stay in the regions.⁶ Analysis from Jobs and Skills Australia found that 70% of regional school students who attended a regional university were living in a regional area five years later. In contrast, 76.9% of regional school students who moved to a major city for university study were still living in a major city five years later.⁷

It is therefore critical that regional students, both those in schools and recent school-leavers, can access local tertiary education where possible, and are supported with a variety of locally tailored specialist pathways that can lead them to their preferred career.

Recognition of prior learning

The draft recommendation to move toward a national system of credit transfer and recognition of prior learning (RPL) (Draft recommendation 2.1) is welcomed. Improving the RPL process will reduce barriers to upgrading qualifications and help regional and remote communities develop skilled workforces.

VET and higher education systems provide parallel pathways to success. Whilst serving different needs, they can both lead to rewarding careers and students should be encouraged to follow the post-school pathway that best suits them.

⁵ Jobs and Skills Australia, Better Together – The Jobs and Skills Report 2024, November 2024, 85, [Better Together - The Jobs and Skills Report 2024 | Jobs and Skills Australia](#)

⁶ [Jobs and Skills Australia – Jobs and Skills Roadmap for Regional Australia](#), Phase 1, 3 July 2025, 67

⁷ Jobs and Skills Roadmap for Regional Australia

To support accessible education for all students in the regions we must develop a tertiary sector with robust pathways to both the higher education and VET system and the ability to move seamlessly between them. However, some of the barriers to achieving this outcome are structural issues with the tertiary system, including rigidity of the Australian Qualifications Framework and lack of credit recognition for vocational skills.

I hope that this information is useful. Please do not hesitate to contact me at [REDACTED] should you require further information.

Yours sincerely

[REDACTED]

Fiona Nash
Regional Education Commissioner