

# Creating aspiration for a rural health career

**A**s Australia's first regional education commissioner, I want all people in regional, rural and remote Australia, regardless of where they live, to be able to access the education and career opportunities they need to reach their full potential. Having spent most of my life in country Australia, I know that some challenges can be greater in the regions compared with the cities, such as going to school or university or moving your family for work. Much is made of offering financial and other incentives or subsidies to encourage students to relocate to, or eventually practise in, the country, and there is certainly a place for that. But I like to think that rural living offers its own rewards. Regional towns have a strong sense of community, where you know and support your neighbours, and they know and support you.

Unfortunately, not enough people are asking themselves "is a career in rural health a great option for me?". This needs to change, because health professionals are central to rural communities — by providing essential services, they are valued and indispensable parts of the regional fabric. We know that there are challenges for health professionals who practise in the regions, such as vast distances from peers and colleagues. But there may not be enough focus on the many opportunities for health professionals in the regions. Practising in the regions can help health professionals develop broad skills, self-reliance and confidence earlier in their career than they might otherwise. It also offers them the chance to provide health and wellbeing services to their own community, and to become respected leaders and trusted mentors.

Unsurprisingly, the National Skills Commission identified care sector occupations as some of the most important in terms of future skill needs for Australia. To give a sense of the scale of future demand, the National Skills Commission has projected that an additional 100 000 health professionals, at least, will be needed across Australia over the next 5 years.<sup>1</sup>

So, what can be done to attract students to a career in rural health? In discussions with stakeholders across the education sector and industry groups, a recurring theme is the importance of information for young students who are making decisions about the careers and pathways that suit them. The role of locally informed career advisers is critically important.

Equally important is exposing regional students to industries and potential career pathways throughout their education, in a relatable way. As the adage goes, you cannot be what you cannot see. Industries like health should inspire the next generation of skilled workers by getting involved at the school level and letting students know about the opportunities to work in health care. Industry ambassadors — such as rural dentists or pharmacists who travelled away from home to learn before returning to regional Australia — can share their experiences at schools,

making the pathway feel more attainable and lifting aspiration in regional students. Flying doctors and speech pathologists who practise by telehealth can demonstrate the potential for exciting careers that apply technology to make a difference in communities.

Attending university can be a daunting experience. For a young person who needs to leave their home and community to study, it brings additional challenges and expense. Indeed, some of our future health professionals may well be the first in their family to go to university. Successive reviews prepared for the federal government — such as the Review of Australian Higher Education (Bradley review)<sup>2</sup> and the National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy (Naphthine review)<sup>3</sup> — have shown that financial barriers for regional and remote students, particularly those relating to relocation, are a persistent problem. When regional students have no choice but to leave home to study, because local training options are not available, they need support to do so.

More broadly, universities should consider the support they provide to regional students, to help them achieve their educational goals. Support services need to be visible and accessible; universities need to ensure that students are aware of the support available, and they should establish proactive methods to identify and support students who require assistance.

When a student has the opportunity to study closer to home, this benefits their community. We know that health students from regional areas, and those who undertake extensive training in a rural setting, are more likely to take up practice in the regions.<sup>4,5</sup>

I remember talking to a high school principal in Albury not long after the announcement that there would be university medical schools in regional areas, where students would be able to do their entire degree. He had been speaking to three of his students, who were all very excited because they would not have to leave home and move to a city to study medicine. The smile on his face said it all.

It is also important to offer health students the opportunity to train in rural and remote communities. One example is the Rural Health Multidisciplinary Training program, which aims to improve the recruitment and retention of medical, nursing, dental and allied health professionals in rural and remote Australia.

Many years ago, when I was visiting the University Centre for Rural Health in Lismore, I spoke to a young student from Sydney who was studying there. She said that being in Lismore had completely changed her view of where she wanted to be. From the experience, she was sure that her future was not going to be in the city — it was going to be living and working in a regional community.

**Hon. Fiona Nash**

Regional Education  
Commissioner,  
Canberra, ACT.

[fiona.nash@  
education.gov.au](mailto:fiona.nash@education.gov.au)

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Sharing the opportunities of working in health industries in regional, rural and remote Australia with young people, and making these professions attainable and relevant to them, will go a long way towards creating aspiration and vision for future career pathways. Balancing inspiration with investment will equip our future health professionals to meet the needs of their patients for decades to come. And if we get that inspiration and investment right, many more people will answer “yes” when they consider whether a career in rural health is a great option for them.

**Competing interests:** Fiona Nash is the Regional Education Commissioner and a member of the Australian Universities Accord Panel and the National School Reform Agreement Ministerial Reference Group.

**Provenance:** Commissioned; externally peer reviewed. ■

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1 National Skills Commission. Employment outlook: industry and occupation trends over the five years to November 2026. Canberra:

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- 2 Australian Government. Review of Australian Higher Education: final report. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2008. <https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2008-12/apo-nid15776.pdf> (viewed June 2023).
- 3 Australian Government. National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy: final report. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2019. <https://www.education.gov.au/access-and-participation/resources/national-regional-rural-and-remote-tertiary-education-strategy-final-report> (viewed June 2023).
- 4 Walker J, DeWitt D, Pallant J, et al. Rural origin plus a rural clinical school placement is a significant predictor of medical students' intentions to practice rurally: a multi-university study. *Rural Remote Health* 2012; 12: 1908.
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