

Defining regionality for Australian higher education

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Abstract

Within the higher education sector in Australia regionality is not well defined, which is a significant issue for regional universities, given the opportunities for development and growth stemming from the Australian Government's focus on regional higher education. This paper contends that if regional universities are to operate successfully in an increasingly competitive sector, they need to centre their operations around a clear definition of regionality. Based on a review of definitions of regionality in international higher education contexts, and an analysis of how regionality is defined outside of higher education, this paper provides a definition of regionality for Australian higher education. Whilst acknowledging the differences in potential contexts and applications, this definition seeks to provide a basis upon which regional universities in Australia can determine the ways in which they may create a strong identity, achieve the Australian Government's objectives for regional higher education, and reap the associated benefits.

Keywords: regionality; regional universities; regional higher education; regional universities; regionality in Australian higher education

Introduction

The Australian higher education system includes 37 government-funded, public universities and three private universities offering undergraduate and postgraduate degrees. Domestic undergraduate students access Commonwealth-supported places, whereby the Australian Government pays part of students' tuition fees. Australia is ninth in the world for higher education access rates, with nearly half of students aged 15–64 (1.4 million, 44%) enrolled with a higher education institution in 2020 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2021 and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2022). Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, in 2019–20, international education was worth \$37.4 billion to the Australian economy and Australia had 27.1% of all overseas higher education enrolments globally (Ferguson and Spinks, 2021). All providers are registered by the national regulator, the

Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA), which was established by the Australian Government to undertake quality monitoring and regulation in line with standards developed by an independent panel (Study Australia, 2022). Ten of Australia's 37 public universities have a main campus located regionally rather than in a capital city, reflecting the fact that 'as at June 2017, 32.7% of Australia's population (a little over 8 million people) resided outside greater capital cities and 28.2% lived outside major cities' (Regional Universities Network, 2018a). Data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (ABS, 2022) shows growth in population throughout most regional centres in Australia, with regional population declines limited only to more remote areas, and projections showing that the population outside of Australia's capital cities will grow by 26% between 2007 and 2026 (ABS, 2020b and Regional Universities Network, 2020).

Regionality is a current focus for Australian Government higher education policy agenda, as it seeks to address the long-standing issue of under-representation of regional students in higher education participation and completion rates, which is linked to some significant economic and social challenges facing regional Australia (Department of Education, Skills and Employment (DESE), 2020). For Australia's 10 regionally-headquartered public universities, this policy agenda is particularly significant, as it has the potential to address the challenges and advantages of their operating context, and provides an opportunity for these universities to obtain funding which is not available to their metropolitan counterparts. The Regional Universities Network (RUN), a group of seven regionally-based universities, was established in 2011 to provide its member universities with a conduit for lobbying the Australian Government regarding its policy agenda for regional higher education (RUN, 2022). However, within the higher education sector in Australia the concept of regionality is not well defined, which is a significant issue for regional

universities, given the opportunities for development and growth stemming from the Australian Government's focus on regional higher education.

The lack of a single, consistent definition of regionality represents an opportunity for regional universities to take ownership of the concept, develop their identities through demonstration of their expertise in and commitment to regional higher education, and claim ownership of this space in an increasingly competitive sector. This will serve to assist regional universities to assert their place in the 'Australian University' category of the revised Higher Education Provider Categories contained in the Higher Education Standards Framework 2021. (Australian Government, 2021) Through demonstrating expertise and claiming ownership, regional universities may be able to exert more influence over the directions of Australian Government regional, rural and remote education policy and strategy, which would enable the needs of current and prospective regional, rural and remote students and their communities to be better met.

This paper firstly discusses the context of regionality in higher education in Australia, including how and why the Australian Government is focussed on regionality in higher education, in order to contextualise the socio-political landscape within which regionally-headquartered institutions operate. The categorisation of Australian universities is then discussed, with the aim of showing how and why regionality is a critical component of the identity of regional universities. Following, an analysis of the literature relating to regionality is undertaken, demonstrating that despite the Australian Government's focus on regionality, it is an ill-defined concept in Australian higher education, which may impact negatively on both the Government's ability to set effective policy, and regional universities' ability to address it. From this analysis, a definition of regionality, that acknowledges the differences in potential contexts and applications of such a definition, will be provided.

Regionality in Australian higher education

In recent years, the Australian Government has been particularly focussed on regional, rural and remote education, which has significant implications for all universities, and particularly those headquartered in regional Australia. The legislative, financial and policy context within which universities in Australia operate is largely determined by the Australian Government, and the sector is subject to ‘ongoing changes in government policy driven by political agenda to revolutionise tertiary education particularly in the Australian context’ (Shah, 2013, p. 24). Successive Australian Governments have developed education policy with specific focus on regionality, with Roberts (2015, p. 117) asserting that access to education for those in regional, rural and remote Australia has long been a concern for all levels of government.

Subsequent to the *Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education* commissioned by the Australian Government in 2017 (Halsey, 2018, p. 3), the *National Regional, Rural and Remote Education Strategy* was released in 2019 (Naphthine et al. 2019). In 2020, the Minister for Education announced a wide-ranging higher education reform package, which included a number of measures in response to the strategy, key amongst which were: as expanded accessibility of sub-bachelor programs; improved access to Youth Allowance for regional students; expanded accessibility for bachelor level students at regional study hubs; the appointment of a Regional Education Commissioner; and tertiary access payments (later changed to scholarships) for regional, rural and remote students (DESE, 2020a). These measures are aimed at increasing access to education for students in regional and rural areas, which the Australian Government is focussed on because of the economic and social benefits derived from this increased access.

Although Australia is one of the most urbanised countries in the world, it has a significant non-urban population (Potts 2003, p. 136). As the population in these regional areas grows, so will the need for infrastructure and services which require a skilled,

university-qualified workforce. In order for the Government to support the predicted growth in regional populations, the enablement of universities in regional, rural and remote areas to drive productivity and foster growth and development in these communities will be crucial (DESE, 2021).

Despite population growth in these regional, rural and remote areas, the educational attainment of students remains below the national average, and Halsey (2018, p. 25) asserts that people from regional and remote areas remain underrepresented in higher education. According to Universities Australia (2017, p. 2), over the period 2011 to 2015, total domestic undergraduate enrolments increased by 19.5%, but regional student numbers grew by just under 17%, and in 2016 people from major cities remained twice as likely to hold a university degree as those from regional and remote areas. With the costs and personal complexities associated with moving from regional, rural and remote areas to more urbanised areas to obtain a university qualification, the role of regional universities is significant in enabling students to attend university locally, particularly given that a 2017 study by the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, 2017) found that students who leave regional areas to study in an urban institution are unlikely to return. Further, data from a study commissioned by RUN shows that 70% of graduates from RUN universities will go on to work in the regions after graduation, compared to 20% of graduates from other Australian universities (RUN, 2018b).

Regionality in higher education is a key focus for the Australian Government because there are significant costs to be borne if the attainment divide is not bridged, and young people from regional, rural and remote areas continue to either not gain higher qualifications, or permanently move out of their communities in order to do so. The Australian Council of Trade Union (ACTU) notes that unemployment is well above average in remote regions, with underemployment also higher in these areas (ACTU., 2018). Halsey (2018, p. 25) cites a

study by Lamb and Huo (2017) which shows that those not in full-time work or study by age 24, and who do not subsequently access full-time work or higher education, produce a cost impact on society of around \$412,000 per person, with the total social cost of a lifetime of disengagement is \$69.3 billion. Halsey (2018, p. 25) further notes that, according to the Australian Government, this amount represents about 15% of all of the Australian Government budgeted expenditure for 2016-17, so improving the outcomes for this group will have a significant positive economic impact.

Most of Australia's food and resources, both for domestic use and export, are produced in and/or sourced from regional, rural and remote areas. Evidence from the Reserve Bank of Australia (2020) shows that agriculture has been the largest contributor to Australia's GDP growth in recent years, and resources represent by far the largest export product from Australia. Additionally, these areas play a key role in other key export industries, including tourism and education, which, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, was the fourth largest export industry in Australia (Australian Council of Learned Academies, 2019, p. 2). Given the significant impact of these products and industries on the economy, the Australian Government's interest in regionality is unsurprising. Halsey (2018, p. 6) asserts 'productive rural communities are integral to Australia's sustainability and prosperity', and the Minister for Education noted in a media release in June 2020 that there is much to be gained from growing regional universities and unlocking the potential of regional and rural Australia (DESE, 2021).

A key driver of continued growth in sectors such as agriculture and energy is the research undertaken by regional universities. There is a distinct advantage for regional universities undertaking applied research relevant to their regions, as their colocation with industry practitioners and stakeholders means that, in this context, it is the metropolitan universities that are disadvantaged by geographical dislocation (Department of Industry,

Innovation and Science, 2016). According to RUN (2018a), its member universities play ‘a key role in supporting regional innovation which is reflected in their capacity to attract a relatively high proportion of their research funding from industry’. This creates a mutually beneficial economic impact in the regions, where both the university and the funding provider receive tangible benefits from the research, providing a win-win situation for the community.

As Winter et al. (2006, p. 217) indicate, the material wellbeing of regions is supported by applied research which is understood to be of value to the community. Such direct value is easier for regional universities to demonstrate than their metropolitan counterparts, as the time associated with knowledge transfer in a local context is reduced, which combined with local socialisation, reinforces the innovation process and the connectedness of the university and the local industry (Malmberg et al. 1996 in Garlick, 2000, p. 17). For the Australian Government, the ongoing growth and development of regionally located universities is essential to underpinning this knowledge creation and transfer framework, and goes far beyond the traditional role of regional universities as a ‘tool for expenditure injection in peripheral regions’ (Garlick, 2000, p. 3). As noted by Gibbons (2002 in Duke, 2004, p. 308) regionally-located institutions do research better attuned to national economic development, which reinforces the view of RUN (2017) which in its submission to the Productivity Commission on the Initial Report on Transitioning Regional Economies, stated if the economic power of regional universities was more effectively utilised by the Government, these institutions could ‘contribute even more to community wealth building’ (p. 2).

University identity

All Australian universities, regardless of their location, are connected to their country and state, as well as their more precise physical location. In larger Australian states, the part of

the state in which an institution is located can represent another aspect of regionality, as can a coastal location compared with an inland one. These layers of regionality all have implications for the identity of all universities, no matter their location, but for regional universities, the impact of location is far more significant, because unlike in capital cities, regional centres host only one university, and so the relationship between the region and the university is unique. The university is intimately involved in the ‘the creation of human capital, social capital and the realisation of employment, investment and income generating economic development priorities’ (Garlick 2000, p. 4) within the region. Those living in regional communities where university campuses are located understand well the connectedness, where vice-chancellors sit on health service boards, where someone senior from the university attends every school prize-giving evening, where regional farmers know the soil researchers by their first names, and where the path to the university library is well worn by local residents. As asserted by Fathi and Wilson (2009, p. 93) and Immordino et al. (2016, p. 37), the ambiguity, complexity and change which features in the higher education sector means that universities need to think deliberately about their futures and carefully define their profiles, and this is certainly the case for regional universities. By defining regionality in Australian higher education, regional universities will have a basis upon which to focus and sharpen their profiles.

Despite the clear governmental focus on regional higher education, regionality is not used in any official way to classify universities in Australia. Higher education institutions are categorised via the application of Higher Education Provider Category Standards, which serve the key purposes of defining the requirements of higher education providers, safeguarding the reputation of Australian higher education, and acting as a regulatory tool for TEQSA (TEQSA, 2021). In 2018, the Minister for Education commissioned a Review of Australia’s Higher Education Provider Category Standards, with the remit of ensuring that

the Standards remain ‘fit for purpose against Australia’s changing higher education landscape, comparable to international benchmarks, and accommodating to innovative and changing practice’ (Coaldrake, 2019, p. v). The review recommended the introduction of four new provider categories – Institute of Higher Education, University College, Australian University, and Overseas University, to replace the previous six, with the review author asserting that ‘our universities are currently over-categorised’ (Coaldrake, 2019, p vii). Given that the recommendations from this review were accepted by the Australian Government and brought into effect via the Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2021 (TEQSA, 2021), it is apparent that the Australian Government does not have any appetite for formally categorising or identifying universities in the way that they identify themselves through groups such as the Group of Eight, Innovative Research Universities, and RUN. With neither the Halsey Review (Halsey, 2018) nor the Australian Government response (DESE, 2018) providing a definition of regionality other than those already in use, it will be up to the universities to lobby the Government on the basis of the particular strengths and attributes of their groups, carving out their own identities within the generic category of ‘Australian University’.

In the modern higher education context, university identity is closely linked to the strategy and operations of institutions, with Steiner et al. (2012, p. 404) noting that ‘Organizational identity plays a central role in the strategic process of a university’ and Marginson (2007, p 117) observing that specialisation of mission and identity are increasingly emphasised in Australian Government policy, resulting in the need for universities to focus on differentiating themselves through focussing on their areas of strength. For those universities which are headquartered in regional Australia, their identity is linked to their geographic location and the arising socio-economic and political environment, but this aspect of university identity is not well understood. The following review of current

definitions in the Australian context will draw out the various aspects of regionality in higher education.

Defining Regionality in the context of Australian higher education

Current Australian definitions

Given that the Australian Government funds and regulates higher education in Australia, how it defines regionality is a key consideration. Over the past 30 years, the Australian Government has placed considerable focus on regional, rural and remote education, but has not provided any more explicit or refined definition of regionality other than that used for administrative purposes, including the ABS (ABS, 2021) definition which categorises by major city and four other categories of remoteness, and the Department of Home Affairs (DHA) definition which describes regional Australia as any part of the country that is not a capital city (DHA, 2021). In the 1980s, in *A Fair Go*, the Australian Government's Strategy for Rural Education and Training (Dawkins & Kerin, 1989) the term 'rural' is used interchangeably with 'regional', and defined as 'non-metropolitan'. In 2008, the Review of Australian Higher Education covered the topic of regional provision in significant detail, but without defining regionality other than as 'rest of state' (Bradley et al., 2008, p. 109). The terms of reference for the *2017 Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education* do not define explicitly the concept of regionality. Rather, it is mentioned in a manner similar to that used by the Department of Home Affairs, in that regional, rural and remote students are defined by default to be all those who are not based in metropolitan areas (DESE, 2022). The Review itself does not attempt to define regionality, instead using the ABS 'five mainland remoteness categories' (Halsey, 2018, p. 25) as noted earlier in this paper. The Government definition of regionality is by negation, where it is defined by what it is not, rather than what it is, a definition described by the Department of Industry, Innovation

and Science (2016, p. 19) as ‘convenient’.

Regionality is not defined in any more meaningful ways within the higher education sector itself, with a search of the literature revealing no explicit exploration of how regionality is defined in Australia. Similarly, government agencies such as TEQSA and Regional Development Australia, lobby groups such as RUN, and industry groups such as the Regional Australia Institute do not offer a definition of regionality which is any more meaningful than those currently employed by the Australian Government. Without a definition of regionality in Australia more generally, and in higher education specifically, “‘Regional Australia’ has become a synonym for nonmetropolitan Australia’ (Tomaney & Wray, 2011, p. 918). This lack of definition, or definition by negation, ignores the complex inter-connections between regional universities and their communities, and means that the identification of universities as ‘regional’ conveys no formal meaning other than physical location outside of those areas designated as metropolitan.

International definitions

Based on the similarities in the structures, systems and processes across higher education sectors across the world, definitions of regionality used in higher education internationally may be of some use in developing an Australian definition. From and Olofsson (2016, p. 2) note that European education policy has seen the contemporary focus of universities being to benefit society, asserting that higher education is seen as a tool for regional economic growth, with universities the driver for the knowledge economy and ‘engines for regional growth’ (Budyldina, 2018, p. 266). As such, regionality in the European context may be defined as the way in which a higher education institution directly benefits the economic growth and development of the community in which it is located. Kitigawa (2005) points to examples universities in Europe having created ‘exemplary regions’ (p. 70) including Cambridge in the

United Kingdom and Twente in the Netherlands. As From and Olofsson (2016, p. 3) detail, this expectation of societal benefit ‘can be more significant for regional institutions of higher education in more sparsely populated regions’ where the university may be the most significant direct contributor to the regional economy, an assertion supported by Kitigawa (2005) who cites examples from Finland in the early 1990s, when in the face of deep recession and unemployment, universities became the engines of regional and rural economic recovery.

Literature relating to the US higher education system does not use singular definition of regionality. This may be due to the sheer size and complexity of the system, but it may be because a definition has not been proposed which defines the concept in an effective way such as to bring it into common use. Regional comprehensive universities in America were founded to ‘facilitate college access and strengthen the economy’ (Orphan & McClure, 2019, p. 1) and the 430 institutions across America are publicly funded to service predefined areas (Orphan & McClure, 2019, p. 1). The definition of regional used in this context differs significantly from the Australian Government and European definitions, as more than two-thirds of regional comprehensive universities in the US are located within in metropolitan areas, to service particular sections of the community including racial minorities, immigrants, and first-in family students (American Association of State Colleges and Universities, 2020). All of these regional comprehensive universities, including the 32% located in non-metropolitan areas, are ‘rooted in place and, by design and charter, are intricately connected to their regions’ Orphan and McClure (2019, p. 1). In this context, regionality refers to what Allen et al. (1998, p. 3) call ‘a particular set of economic and social legacies’ which the higher education institutions are required by their missions to address.

Developing a definition for the Australian higher education context

The way in which social scientists use the term regionality may be of some use in developing a definition particular to higher education in Australia. In social science, regions are seen as social constructions rather than solely geographical entities, which only exist in particular contexts or in relation to particular criteria (Allen et al., 1998, p. 3 and Lemke, 1995 in Green, 2012, p. 7). This way of defining regionality is of relevance to the higher education context, because it acknowledges that the regionality of a university consists of more than simply physical location. The notion of ‘the campus’ and its location has long been important in higher education, as reflected by Chatterton and Goddard (2000, p. 476), however this notion of geographic location differs from that of regionality, particularly for capital-city based universities, with Beer and Cooper (2007, p.1065) noting that ‘universities such as the University of Adelaide, the University of Sydney and the University of Queensland have not sought to develop strong links with particular regions’. Differentiating the concept of regionality from that of community is an important aspect of a definition of regionality in the Australian higher education context. Jongbloed et al. (2008, p. 305) state that the notion of community is only important for universities if there is some expectation on both sides of a mutually beneficial exchange can take place, whereas for regional universities, their existence is tied to their regionality, as they make critical contributions to national imperatives, specifically educational access and socio-economic development (Nelson et al., 2017, p. 1).

Examples of regional Australian universities with intrinsic links to their communities can be found in strategic plans, which provide a tool for each university to shape itself to its external environment through carefully defining its profile and objectives (Dooris et al., 2004, p. 7). James Cook University (JCU) has its main campus in the far north Queensland regional city of Townsville. The *University Plan 2018-2022* (JCU, 2017, p.4) it states “Place is Powerful - The Tropics is our place” and further ‘Our place underpins our teaching, research and

engagement and gives a unique JCU flavour to our work' (JCU, 2017, p26). Similarly, the University of the Sunshine Coast (USC), based in the regional Queensland community of the Sunshine Coast, states its vision to be 'an unsurpassed community asset, focusing on the region from Moreton Bay to Fraser Coast.' (USC, 2019, p. 2), and the University of New England (UNE) based in the regional New South Wales city of Armidale which includes in its strategic plan a focus on its communities, with specific reference to 'place-based education and research' (UNE, 2021). Comparitively, capital city universities in the Australian context include the general notion of community (Chatterton & Goddard, 2000, p. 476) rather than regionality in their strategic goals, for example 'we seek to enrich communities here in Queensland' (University of Queensland, 2022), 'the work of the University and the life of the various communities – local, national and international – of which it is a part' (University of Sydney, 2016).

A major issue in considering how regionality is defined in the context of higher education in Australia is the negative connotations associated with regionality. Tomaney and Wray (2011, p. 918) assert that 'the term 'region' may carry a pejorative meaning in Australia, suggesting economic marginalization or a lower level of development' with Duke (2002 in Kitigawa 2005, p. 66) agreeing that regionality in the context of higher education can be seen 'as a source of stigma' and Chatterton and Goddard (2000, p. 478) reflecting that it is 'equated with parochialism'. This view of regionality as a 'weak, low-status identifier, to be embraced only where there is clear financial advantage' (Duke, 2004, p. 303) may have developed from what Chipman (1997 in Potts 2003, p. 136) refers to as the 'urbist' predisposition of Australians to disparage that which exists outside of the capital cities. Chipman (1997 in Potts 2003, p. 136) further notes that although many of the world's most prestigious universities are located in regional areas (such as Oxford and Cambridge in the UK and Yale in the US), regional universities in Australia have been seen by the government,

and the population more generally, as problematic simply due to the nature of their location. It may be that this view of regional universities is linked to the use of the term ‘anchor institution’ to describe universities located in regional areas. The term derives from anchor institution social policy in the US, which came about in the 1960s after industry and large corporations withdrew from urban areas and the remaining organisations stepped up to fill in the void (Taylor and Luter 2013 in Ehlenz, 2018, p. 75). The concept of universities as anchor institutions in the US is associated with promoting access to education and addressing neglect and deteriorating in both urban and rural communities (Orphan & McClure, 2019, p. 4) and is described by Taylor and Luter (2013, p. 2) as a ‘social-purpose credo of higher education’. In the UK, ‘the government has advanced the concept of anchor institutions as part of a “building stronger communities and businesses” policy strand’ (Smallbone et al. 2015 in Elliott, 2018, p. 79) which is reflective of the desire to reverse a downward spiral in marginalised areas.

In his Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education in Australia, Halsey (2018, p. 50) refers to regional universities as anchor organisations which can ‘help turn around decline and stagnation’. Similarly, Burkett and Hannant (2020) talk about anchor institutions as a vehicle for place-based investment to address disadvantage, whilst Slay (2019) refers to them as being bound to the wellbeing of their communities, and aimed at achieving direct economic intervention to create place-based change. However, others such as Bell (2019) have flagged a move away from this definition of anchor institution, as the role of universities extends beyond the traditional one of mooring individuals and institutions to a struggling region, be it urban or regional, to that of a partnership between a university and its region/s, where the socio-economic outcomes of the relationship may only be one consideration in a range of benefits derived. Given the potential for negative connotations

(for a region and thereby the institutions located within it), any definition of regionality in the Australian context needs to focus on advantage rather than deficit.

The work of Goddard et al. (2016, p. 5) in defining the concept of a ‘civic university’ may be a more useful concept to regionality than ‘anchor institution’. Goddard et al. (2016 p. 5) describe a civic university as operating on a global scale, whilst ‘realising that its location helps to form its identity and provide opportunities for it to grow’. Further, they note that a sense of place is central to a civic university, as it ‘recognises the extent to which its location helps to form its unique identity as an institution’ (Goddard et al. 2016, p. 10). Kiwan (2018, p. 116) describes the civic university as ‘being in synergy with other actors at different sites and scales, as a co-producer of knowledge, and where the missions of teaching, research and public good are intertwined’. This definition provides a reflection of the multi-dimensional nature of regionality, and the reciprocal nature of connections between universities and their regions. As noted by Goddard et al. (2016, p. x), a civic university ‘knows not only what it is good at but also what it is good for’, meaning that as well as striving for excellence in its functions of teaching and research, such a university is also aware of how and why these core functions should respond to the needs of its region/s.

It is suggested that a definition of regionality in the higher education context in Australia should not default to the oft-used, ‘non-metropolitan’ definition, and, whilst acknowledging the importance of geographic location, it should include the concept of a region as a social construct which is context dependent. Additionally, the definition should focus on the connections between regions and institutions, avoid negative connotations especially those associated with marginalisation and disadvantage, and to this end incorporate the concept of the civic university rather than the anchor institution. Because regionality is not linked solely to geographic location, it does not only apply to regional universities, but rather to all universities. However, as noted earlier, as regional universities in Australia are

distinguished by being the only university with the main campus in a particular region, the concept of regionality is intrinsic to the identity of these universities, and the particular geographic, socio-economic and political environment in which they are located are central to the missions, strategies and activities of these universities. Each of Australia's capital cities is the site of more than one university, so regionality is likely to be less of an influencer on identity, because the region is not particular to these universities. On this basis, the following definition is offered:

Regionality describes the way in which a higher education institution understands, connects with and responds to the geographic, socio-economic and political context in which it operates. Regionality is a reciprocal concept, where synergies between a region and a higher education institution are mutually beneficial, and positively contribute to the identity of both. Regional universities in Australia is defined as those which have a main campus not located in a capital city.

Conclusion

If regional universities are to seek advantage through responding to the Australian Government's regional policy agenda and as a result, receive the maximum amount of associated financial and political benefit, they must ensure that they demonstrate understanding of and connection with the underlying aims of the policy. Governmental focus on regional higher education is purposeful, and so must the response be from regional universities.

The Australian Government has an obvious mandate for regionality in its higher education policy, and without a considered and enunciated strategy to address this, regional universities will find it difficult to thrive. Despite there being no current intention by the Australian Government to formally categorise regional universities, regionality is mentioned throughout the Review of Australia's Higher Education Provider Category Standards Report,

with the author noting that ‘We already experience significant challenges in attracting and retaining professional expertise in regional centres and remote communities ... Australia’s higher education sector will need to continue to strengthen and innovate as it responds to these emerging needs and challenges’ (Coaldrake, 2019, p. 10). It is regional universities that have the history, expertise and connection to community to respond efficiently and effectively to the needs of regional Australia. As a collective, regional universities need to set the agenda in terms of how regionality in higher education in Australia is defined, by consistently using an agreed definition such as that developed in this paper as a tool to demonstrate the specific expertise regional universities have in relation to regional, rural and remote communities. By bringing this definition into common usage across the sector more broadly and the Australian Government, regional universities can take ownership of their place in the sector, assert their identity, and enable their own prosperity. The current gap in understanding of what regionality means in the Australian higher education context represents a significant opportunity for regional universities, which must turn their strong sense of place into quantified, demonstrated and measured strategies to be operationalised for their own benefit, that of their regions, and more broadly Australia as a whole.

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