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**AHISA MEDIA RELEASE**

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

## **Bridging the education opportunity gap for students in regional, rural and remote areas**

The Association of Heads of Independent Schools of Australia (AHISA) has welcomed the report of the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education, instituted by the Australian Government and led by Emeritus Professor John Halsey.

AHISA's CEO, Ms Beth Blackwood said Professor Halsey's review confirms an important finding of the Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre's study of education inequality in Australia, that educational opportunity gaps – and therefore the support required to bridge them – can be area-specific.

'Our own research among Heads of day and/or boarding schools in regional and remote areas, and Heads who lead boarding schools in major cities, affirms that government programs aimed at bridging opportunity gaps must be flexible enough to allow for community and school differences to be accommodated,' said Ms Blackwood.

Ms Blackwood said the most commonly reported factor impacting on educational provision in schools in regional and remote areas was difficulty in recruiting teachers, followed by depressed local economic conditions.

'Local economic conditions significantly affect the post-school employment and training options of students, which in turn affects students' aspirations, their engagement with school and therefore their academic achievement,' said Ms Blackwood.

Ms Blackwood said independent schools in regional, rural and remote areas were addressing this cycle of disadvantage in a number of ways, including:

- Expanding or augmenting subject offerings through online courses, video conferencing or by partnering with other schools
- Interacting with the local community by linking the curriculum with localised projects or tailoring service learning projects to local need
- Encouraging school engagement and academic achievement through personalised student learning plans, by accessing mentors from the community or alumni, introducing a 'stage not age' approach to student choice of electives and senior secondary subjects, and establishing homework 'boot camps' and homework clubs

- Encouraging post-school aspirations by linking with regional universities, and through visits to university open days, student exchanges with city-based or overseas schools, provision of VET courses allied to local industry and specialist VET placements.

‘Our research revealed that schools in regional and remote areas rely on connection to the internet and digital technologies as a key means to overcome the “tyranny of distance” and to expand their educational offerings and meet individual learning needs,’ said Ms Blackwood. ‘This could be in the form of providing an opportunity for one or more students to access a senior secondary course via distance education, providing extension work for gifted and talented students through access to MOOCs, or offering students the opportunity to complete an online Certificate or Diploma course as a specialist elective.’

Ms Blackwood said it was pleasing that a major recommendation of the Halsey review was to improve the availability, accessibility and affordability of information and communications technologies for schools, teachers, students, parents and communities in regional, rural and remote areas.

‘Digital technologies also assist boarding students adjust to life away from home,’ said Ms Blackwood. ‘Heads of boarding schools in cities and in regional and remote areas report that Skype is commonly used to keep students and families connected. Some schools also help prospective students overcome initial gaps in learning by including them in online classes the year before they begin boarding.’

Ms Blackwood said that the Australian Government is to be commended for initiating the review, which it is hoped will support a sustained policy focus on regional issues in school education.

‘Whether students from regional, rural and remote areas are educated at home or in boarding schools, any government policies or programs aiming to broaden their educational opportunities must take into account that schools and their students reflect the broader social and economic conditions of their local communities,’ said Ms Blackwood. ‘While schools may share common challenges, these challenges are best addressed in ways that are suited to the school community if government programs are to be most effective in bridging the opportunity gaps for students in regional, rural and remote areas.’

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Contact: Ms Beth Blackwood, AHISA CEO, mobile 0417 180 842.

AHISA is a professional association of 430 Heads of independent schools. Its members lead schools that collectively account for over 11 per cent of total Australian school enrolments and 20 per cent of Year 12 enrolments.

AHISA’s submission to the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education presents the results of two surveys of AHISA members – one of members leading day and/or boarding schools in regional and remote areas, and the other of members who lead boarding schools in major cities. The submission is available on [AHISA’s website](https://submissions.education.gov.au/Forms/IRRRRE/Documents/Association-of-Heads-of-Independent-Schools-of-Australia.pdf) and is also published on the Department of Education’s website at <https://submissions.education.gov.au/Forms/IRRRRE/Documents/Association-of-Heads-of-Independent-Schools-of-Australia.pdf>.