Kitchen Table Report: a brighter future for rural, regional, and remote Australia

Australian Rural Leadership Foundation

Background

The Australian Rural Leadership Foundation (ARLF) exists to serve the greater good of rural, regional, and remote Australia. We do this primarily through experiential leadership development programs and initiatives conducted since 1992. Through our commitment to leadership action, we have regularly convened *kitchen table* conversations since 2015 within our network. We believe the *kitchen table* is a place to come together to express diverse views, start difficult conversations and understand the role of leadership in helping shape the future. *Kitchen tables* aim to construct a narrative about the future 'we' want for rural, regional and remote Australia, and the key priorities to realise this future. Common themes, responses and desirable actions continue to emerge as a result.

These conversations have not occurred in a vacuum. From local community to sectoral, regional, state and national levels, initiatives about the future of regional Australia and what is needed to realise a better future have and continue to be an area of interest. The Australian government and parliament have commissioned and responded to numerous reviews and reports over recent years including the Regional Development Australia Independent Review (2016), the House of Representatives established the Select Committee on Regional Development and Decentralisation report, *Regions at the Ready: Investing in Australia's Future* (2018) and the report of the Strategic Regional Growth Expert Panel, *Australia's Regions: Investing in Their Future* (2019). Other key regional organisations such as the Regional Australia Institute and the Foundation for Rural and Regional Renewal and their initiatives are examples of other work that continues with a focus on regional Australia.

Kitchen Tables 2020

In 2020, the ARLF hosted a series of webinars in response to the global disruption resulting from the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19), and the national bushfire crisis of the Summer of 2019/20. The webinars sparked conversations that went beyond the immediate crisis to an adaptive approach including what people want for the future of their community and region.

The ARLF responded by inviting alumni to host another round of kitchen table conversations of 5 – 10 people within their industry, workplace, or region with the offer to collate feedback and share the broader reflections and priorities with our stakeholder network. This paper provides a summary of conversation themes in response to two key questions posed:

1. What do we want for rural regional and remote Australia?
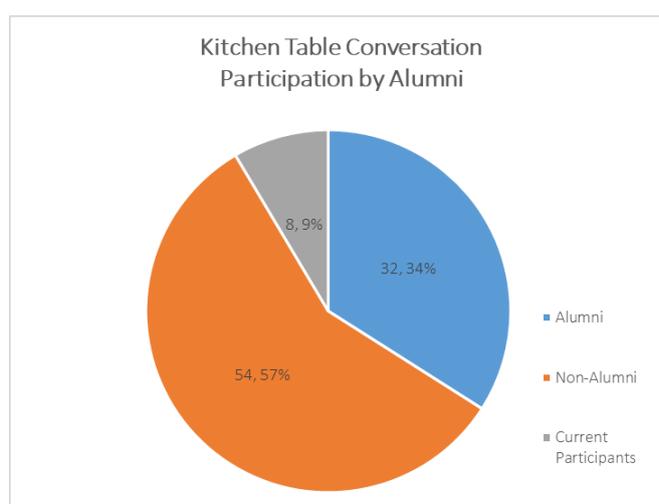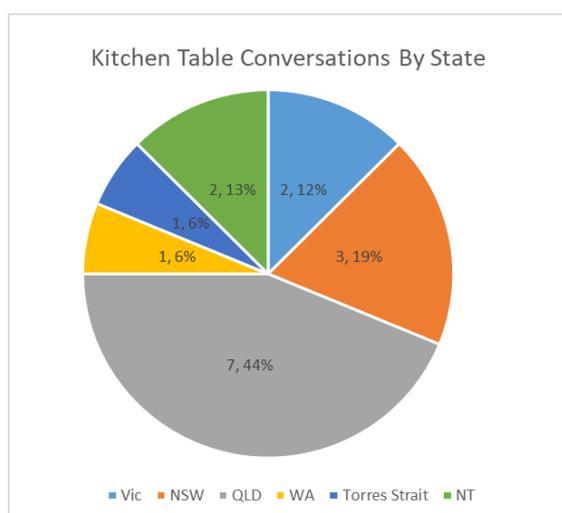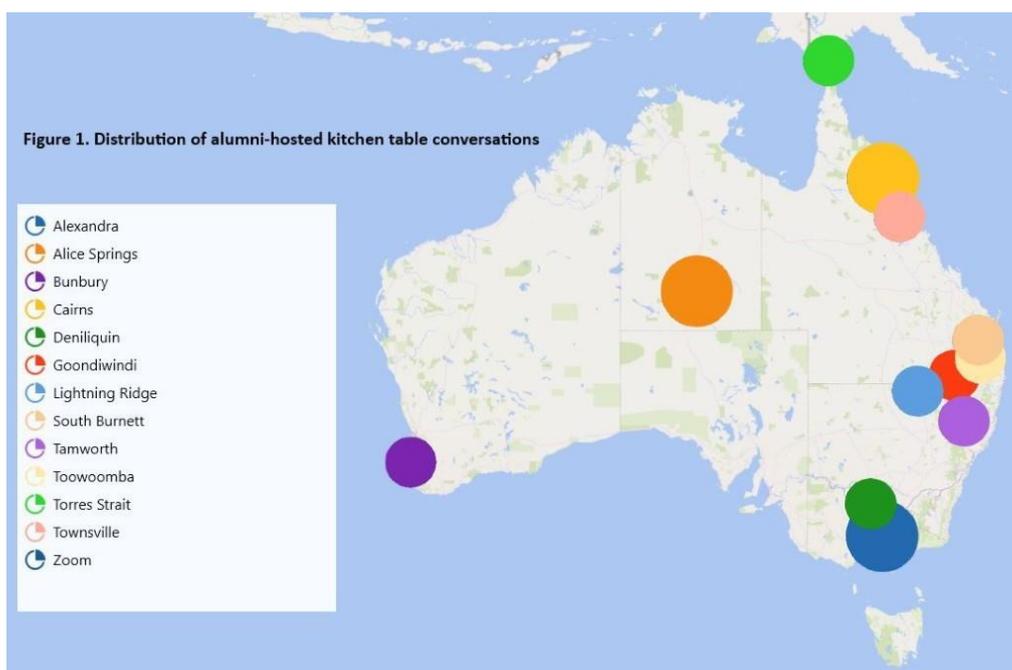*2. What do we need to do to take hold of these opportunities?*

The data in this paper represents the responses from the groups that participated, and we acknowledge that not all regions/sectors and views may be represented.

Who was involved?

An invitation to host a kitchen table conversation was extended to ARLF alumni as well as participants on programs at the time. Over a six-week period just over 30 alumni and eight participants hosted or participated in 16 conversations with more than 60 people.

There was an even distribution of male and female participants (50 females and 44 males).

The geographic distribution of conversations is represented in the map at figure 1. Of the 16 hosted conversations, 44% were in Queensland, 19% in NSW and the remaining 37% representing Victoria, the Northern Territory, Western Australia and Yam Island in the Torres Strait.

Figure 1. Distribution of alumni-hosted kitchen table conversations

Legend:
- Alexandra
- Alice Springs
- Bunbury
- Cairns
- Deniliquin
- Goondiwindi
- Lightning Ridge
- South Burnett
- Tamworth
- Toowoomba
- Torres Strait
- Townsville
- Zoom

Kitchen Table Conversations By State

Vic: 2, 12%
NSW: 3, 19%
QLD: 7, 44%
WA: 1, 6%
Torres Strait: 1, 6%
NT: 2, 13%

Kitchen Table Conversation Participation by Alumni

Alumni: 32, 34%
Non-Alumni: 54, 57%
Current Participants: 8, 9%

Summary of themes/messages:

What do we want for rural, regional, and remote Australia?

- Communities/regions have greater control of their own future
- Regions create their own narrative
- Planning starts in the regions
- There is greater connectivity to allow people, societies and economies to flourish
- Diversity (including thoughts, views, culture, industries)
- Building the capacity of people and social infrastructure is equally as important as building physical infrastructure
- Regional life is attractive and provides good employment and lifestyle options
- Services and infrastructure need to be personalised to place
- Natural resources are valued and managed sustainably
- Collective interests – the greater good – are valued over self-interest

What do we need to do to take hold of these opportunities?

1. Investment is needed in infrastructure and services, including technological connectivity

- Improvements are needed to enhance the capacity and accessibility of health services and education to better deal with crises, including flexible education options for all residents.
- COVID-19 has shown that jobs can be based anywhere, and people do not need to travel to cities or metropolitan areas for employment. With the increase in internet use and online access to services, this has also highlighted the poor internet bandwidth and infrastructure in some areas.
- COVID also showed the vulnerability of families in dealing with limited infrastructure and resources.

"Home schooling caught all parents off guard. Some parents did not know how to be a teacher to their children, leaving them feeling vulnerable and unable to cope" (Torres Strait Islands)

"(optic) Fibre closes a big gap" (Bunbury, WA)

"...you don't feel as remote if you have connectivity" (Toowoomba, Qld)

2. Identity and formulate strength based regional narratives

- There appears to be a common narrative amongst rural, regional and remote communities that focuses on the negative deficit which is reflected in media commentary. This dialogue needs to change through challenging negative viewpoints, maintaining balanced views and generating positive media stories, while focusing on the benefits and opportunities in rural, regional and remote Australia.
- Communities need to promote the uniqueness of their region, town, and/or local area to help change negative perceptions and attract opportunities.

"Challenge the premise of conversations that start with 'what are the problems...'" (Tamworth, NSW)

"Outsiders see us differently than we see ourselves we need to understand and address this, through effective communication" (Deniliquin, NSW)

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3. Recognise and promote the contribution that rural, regional and remote Australia makes to the nation

In line with changing the narrative, rural, regional and remote Australia needs to articulate and share with the rest of the country the contribution that their communities and regions make to the national economy and national identity.

4. Locally led and inclusive engagement

There is a desire for improved collaboration and better ways of working with governments at all levels.

- Rural, regional and remote communities need genuine consultation and participation in decision making processes, including representation in local governance structures and decision-making models to reflect the diversity of the region. One way of achieving this is going beyond the "usual suspects" and inviting and encouraging others to participate. This also requires residents to step up and be heard.
- Young people must play a role to ensure ownership into the future.
- In terms of working with state and commonwealth governments, consultation with rural, regional and remote Australia must be genuine, and policies, programs and funding timeframes must be innovative and tailored to what is happening on the ground.

"Leaders in our region are motivated to work together to access new tools, engage with decision makers...now and in the future to understand the structural mechanisms to influence and inform remote based decision making" (Alice Springs).

"Policies designed in Canberra in urban centres do not necessarily work on the ground" (Cairns).

5. Build regional capacity, employment opportunities and industry diversity

- Building the leadership capacity of local people is critical as this helps create healthy work cultures and supports the retainment of regional workforces which in turn contributes to building sustainable local industries and businesses.
- Sustainable employment that is specific to each region and diverse enough to not be over-reliant on one sector is critical.
- Regionalise government services and agencies and create regional hubs as shared spaces.
- The opportunity to better understand, manage and invest in our natural land assets for future generations.
- The diversification of business by developing renewable and green energy, eco-tourism and working with the Traditional Owners of the land.
- To invest in local systems and services that cannot be delivered in cities e.g. sustainable waste treatment, power generation and tourism ventures.

"thriving businesses...and great leadership...are fundamental to attracting people and keeping people in rural communities" (conversation via Zoom, Qld)

"we need to break the status quo, make way for new, innovative ways of stimulating our region" (Alice Springs)

6. Regional disaster preparedness planning and improved emergency response

- Be strategic and forward thinking with planning disaster preparedness and emergency response.
- Start with regular, local-led kitchen table conversation-type discussions to create short to long-term plans that are community-led and underpinned by evidence in concert with corporate and Government sectors.
- Workshop ideas through future scenario planning to address the impact of emergencies and catastrophic natural disasters and events, including a plan for the ongoing economic and social disruption caused by Covid -19 Pandemic and climate change.

7. Sustainable management of natural resources

- Collaborate on sustainability to protect our natural land assets, including education across sectors and jurisdictions to better understand the importance of protecting the environment for future generations.
- The creation of a plan that supports initiatives to engage all parties in caring for country and provides opportunities for social, cultural and economic development.
- There is a desire to build a sense of reciprocity in our relationship with our natural resources; drawing from lived experience and understanding community drivers including the wisdom of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
- Long term plans that support individual, sectoral and regional action to better address climate adaptation including initiatives such as Clean Growth Choices.