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Beyond Discord and Deficit: The Failures of Regional Higher Education and Revisioning an Abundant Future

Tara Brabazon[1]

[1] Professor of Cultural Studies, Flinders University, Australia
Email: tara.brabazon@flinders.edu.au

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Abstract

The *Australian Universities Accord Final Report* was released with much publicity on February 25, 2024. Forty-seven recommendations were offered. As with so many of these reports and recommendations around the world, the diagnosis of problems in the sector was clear, but the capacity to create change was truncated, parked, marginalized and missed. This article focuses specific attention on regional higher education institutions and their future imagining beyond the *Universities Accord*. The ideologies of regionality presented and perpetuated in this Report hold consequences not only to the Australian university sector, but to the configuration of effective leadership within it. By perpetuating the ideologies of crisis and deficit, specific alignments of urbanity and education are perpetuated. Therefore, this article demonstrates the alternative ways, shapes and modes of organizing regional education, while transforming theories of urbanity and excellence.

Keywords: Universities, Higher Education, Rurality, Regionality, Remote, Deficit Model, Abundance Model, Leadership, Urbanity, Global Cities, Second Tier Cities, Third Tier Cities, Translocalism

Introduction

Higher Education history is punctuated by reports, reviews and revisions. *The Australian Universities Accord Final Report* was released with much publicity on February 25, 2024 (Department of Education, 2024). It was framed as a transformational moment in Australia's higher education sector. Forty-seven recommendations were offered. Yet, as with so many of these reports, interventions and recommendations around the world, the diagnosis of problems in the sector was clear, but the capacity to create change was truncated, parked, marginalized and missed.

This article focuses specific attention on regional higher education institutions and their future imagining beyond the *Universities Accord*. Therefore, my research commences with an analysis of the Accord report, and its recommendations, when read through the lens of regionality. From an investigation of the textual system in the *Report*, the second section of this paper explores how the ideologies of regionality presented and perpetuated in this Report hold consequences not only to the Australian university sector, but to the configuration of leadership within it. The third and four sections reveal the consequences of perpetuating the ideologies of crisis and deficit, and then the impact of welcoming an abundance model of teaching and research. The final section demonstrates the alternative ways, shapes and modes of organizing regional education through translocalism, transforming theories of urbanity and excellence.

Three literatures are aligned in this article. The first is Critical Higher Education Studies. This extensive literature has pulse points in its historiography, including Stanley Aronowitz's *The Knowledge Factory* (2000), Guy Standing's *The Precariat* (2011), and Stephen Fleming's *Dark Academia* (2021). I also note the importance of Jason Cervone's *Corporatizing Rural Education* (2017). Cervone's book has been under-deployed in Australia and is activated as a critical frame through this article. Each of these books captures the challenges, problems, disappointments and disarray of international higher education. The second literature is derived from city imaging and regional development. Richard Florida (2002), John Urry (2007), Charles Leadbetter (2007), Steve Redhead (2017) and Justin O'Connor (2017) are key names in this field. All value the city, particularly the second-tier and global cities, as engines of economic, social and cultural development. The role of small cities - often described as third-tier cities - and the fourth-tier towns are rarely a focus in this research literature of regional development. They are in deficit, discarded and invisible. The small but powerful literature about small cities and towns includes Paul Farley and Michael Roberts' monograph *Edgelands* (2012) and Robert Chambers' book *Rural Development* (2013). The third literature draws from disability studies (Oslund, 2014) and Henry Giroux-inspired theories of teaching and learning (Giroux, 2024). Focusing on accessibility, universal design, and decentralization, theories of abundance replace tropes of deficit teaching, learning and research. To enable this transformation, the intellectual power of bell hooks is activated to recalibrate notions of 'the centre' and the margin. The goal of this research, to summon bell hooks again, is to "write back from the margins" (2000).

The Universities Accord as a Textual System

Australia is an intriguing place to test divergent models of higher education. It is small enough to ensure that all the 37 public institutions can be researched, but large enough to render the outcomes of the research generalizable. Therefore, as a nation, the

regional, rural and remote are well represented in Australia. In terms of population, the regional matters. In terms of politics and social justice, the remote matters. If food security and health literacy are of interest, then rural locations matter. In terms of population and citizenship, 8.8 million people live outside of the capitals of the Australian cities of Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Perth, Adelaide and Canberra, contributing one third of the national output and employment. This 'minority' matters.

Through the *Universities Accord Report* in 2024, the conventional narrative continued, with the Regional, Rural and Remote (RRR) environments being in deficit, and requiring centralized advice and support. One way to counter this repetitive ideology is to open it for analysis. Semiotics is rarely deployed as a theoretical tool or an analytical strategy in either leadership studies or higher education studies. But there is value in understanding how particular words – signifiers – can enliven or confuse, activate or demean. Therefore, this first section explores how 'region,' 'regions,' and 'regionality' are configured in the semiotic system of the *Universities Accord Report*, with attention to both the frequency of terms and the context in which the words are deployed.

There is a meta agenda in this first section, through the deployment of unobtrusive research methods and non-reactive data sets. The project of revisioning RRR higher education is not hampered by a lack of information. Spanning from strategic plans, annual reports and vision statements from Australia's 37 public institutions and state-based ombudsmen reports, ACOLA Reports and national legislation, a large amount of information exists and is available to read, review and deploy. From this proliferation of information, what is required is a re-envisioned methodology, epistemology and ontology to shape and interpret the data sets for education policy makers, education researchers and higher education leadership.

Leadership matters to the *Accord* document. The report features 148 references to leader and leadership. There are no mentions of follower or followership. Stakeholder and stakeholders are mentioned 85 times. Industry was a major focus, incorporating 311 references. Governance received 44. Quality received 334 mentions. Reading received one. STEM received six mentions. GLAMs received no references. The following terms also had no place or role in the report.

Information literacy
Disciplinary literacy
Academic literacy
Staff turnover
Research misconduct

Indeed, outside of URLs within references, library and librarians received no mention. These absences matter. Therefore, it is significant to note that the scaffolding strategies to empower students to succeed are not discussed. Similarly, 'research training'

has 54 mentions. 'Research education' has none. Training for industry, noting the profound ideological ambiguity dancing around these terms, is a priority. Education for a diversity of life stages and relationships is not. Literacy development – whether information, academic or disciplinary – is absent from the Accord.

Noting these gaps, it is significant to explore what is discussed, and in great detail. Region, regions, regional and regionality received 489 references in the report. Noting these 489 mentions, what was their context? I conducted a content analysis of these references, deploying inductive coding. The categories were developed in response to the context for the word 'regional' in the Report. This was important, as deductive coding would have imposed my expectations and assumptions. These were the categories discovered, ensuring that granular meanings emerged.

'Region' in context	**Number of occurrences**
Under-represented groups in higher education (Regional / Low SES / Indigenous students / students with a disability / impairment	148
Regional Study Hubs	56
Skill shortages in the regions	51
Economic contribution of regional universities to the region	42
Needs-based funding for regional universities	35
Regional medical places	24
Tertiary Access Payments in the region	23
Prospective National Regional University	19
Cost of education in the regions	19
Australia and the South-East Asian Region	17
Regional Education and the local community	16
International student interest in regional education	15
Studying in regional locations	12
Online strategy for the regions	8
National regional education strategy (Napthine Review)	4
TOTAL	**489**

From this content analysis, it is clear that regional, rural and remote education is mashed into other educational injustices, including low socio-economic status, disability, or race. The clustering of these injustices is problematic, as each term reveals a complex origin, history, and application. A distinct methodology is required to address very specific inequalities, marginalizations, access and participation concerns. The clumping of injustices blocks a more elegant discussion of disparate histories and specific solutions or – indeed – a robust discussion of intersectionality. In most cases, the 'access' to higher

education has not increased the 'participation' in higher learning, with the attrition rate remaining high in these disparate groups.

The specific differences between rural, regional and remote locations are under-discussed. The terms are clustered, rather than recognized for their specificity, particularly in education. But also, the rationale for these injustices is not revealed. Instead, assumptions about deficit economic and social models that are perpetuated by the *Accord* document. The lack of clarity in understanding the RRR is unjustifiable in terms of the current literature and policy environment. Therefore, the second section of this paper unpicks the inelegant assumptions and confluences, to reveal the diverse taxonomies that punctuate regional, rural and remote environments.

Unpicking the Assumptions of Regional, Rural and Remote Convergence

The taxonomy of urbanity, rurality and cultural geographies is diverse. For example, in 2016, the Australian Government configured a "remoteness structure" (ABS, 2016). Five categories were listed:

Major cities
Inner regional
Outer regional
Remote
Very remote (ABS, 2016)

Only 1.5% of the Australian population are classified as remote, with 0.8% of the population classified as very remote. Often these definitions are configured through a lack – commencing with a 'lack' of population - and the perpetuation of neocolonial frameworks. There is attention – particularly with regard to health – on the alignment between remoteness, low socioeconomic status and Indigenous Australians. Therefore, this categorization masks as much as it reveals. These terms – through governmental policy - layer disadvantage through urbanity, rurality and remoteness, alongside major gaps in health and education data sets, and the methodologies deployed through the research in these locations. This clustering of ideologies blocks as much as it reveals.

Within a colonial framework, the regional, rural and remote are configured as in deficit to the urban, summoning stories of depopulation (Johnson & Lichter, 2019), reduction in health and education services (Maganty et al., 2023), suicide rates (Kõlves et al., 2012), and extreme political views, which Cramer described as "the politics of resentment" (2016). While these injustices, inequalities, oppressions and discriminations resonate and agitate, the regional, rural and remote are shaped and organized in the interests of global and second tier cities. They contain the political leadership, corporate headquarters, stock markets, functional educational and health infrastructure, and direct,

proxemic alignments of production and consumption.

The concept of regionality, as demonstrated through my inductive content analysis in the first section of this paper, is ambiguously defined and applied. It can be trans-national, such as the South East Asian Region, which incorporates many nations. It can be trans-urban, encompassing a city and its surrounds, like the Greater Manchester Region, incorporating many of the former cotton towns. Region can also be deployed as an adjective for a particular type of urbanity, often disconnected from a capital city, such as the fan of small cities encircling Sydney: Port Macquarie, Dubbo, Orange, Bathurst, Wagga Wagga, and Albury. Some regional locations are also rural. Rurality is an ideology determined in opposition to the urban, based on agricultural industries. The rural is defined by what it is not: urban. However, a series of assumptions accompany this binarized separation. Urbanity is entwined with modernity. These connotations value the urban experience as exciting and dynamic, where there is money to be made. Since the Global Financial Crisis and the pandemic, a rethinking of rurality has emerged, recognizing potential and opportunity.

Remote locations are not only configured through distance from a metropolis, but a lack of infrastructure. Indeed, they are defined through a lack, a difference, and a disconnection. Colonization continues to shunt these places as outside of modernity, and defined through extreme difficulty and absence. Such definitions are coded through the metropolis: large cities become the benevolent providers of development. However, the challenge with these locations is that health and education infrastructure is lacking. The small population enables an active forgetting of these places by policy makers and politicians, which only serves to reinforce existing colonial injustices. Therefore, from these working taxonomies and definitions, a trope to be developed in this article is now summoned. Ambiguous definitions of places are perpetuated through deficit and difference.

Leadership Studies and the Leadership Industry reifies, flattens and simplifies contextual variance – such as location, sociological variables, and history - and therefore produces definitional slippages between influence and power, application and performance, goals and metrics. The specificity of location and community sociology, and precise interfaces between education and the population, are lost through the top down assumption that leadership practices are generalizable. Through this argument, leadership theories in Sydney are transferrable to Dubbo, and – indeed – Blayney, Parkes, Cowra or Menindee. This easy slippage and transferability of experience and expertise is created by simplifying leadership theories into ‘styles’ or ‘modes.’ These nouns block complex ideologies while assuming a generalizability of particular terms. The university leadership theories, behaviours and actions required in Mount Gambier are distinct from Melbourne’s Central Business District. The research leadership required through proximity to a synchrotron is distinct from the leadership strategies required to mobilize resources in

Alice Springs. The requirements of leadership and followership, research and teaching, are startlingly, radically distinct. Discussions of 'leadership models' bury such differentiation and complexity.

Beyond such generalizations, what mode of higher education emerges in these regional, rural and remote locations? Universities are located in major cities, inner region and outer regional locations. Educational and health placements from those universities can be situated in the remote and very remote locations. They are visited as part of a course requirement and assessment. They are not centred. There is no attention placed on the research methodologies required to understand - or emerge from - the specificity of regional, rural and remote locations, in which some universities are situated. Another way to focus on small cities and their universities on their own terms is to slice up and through urbanity.

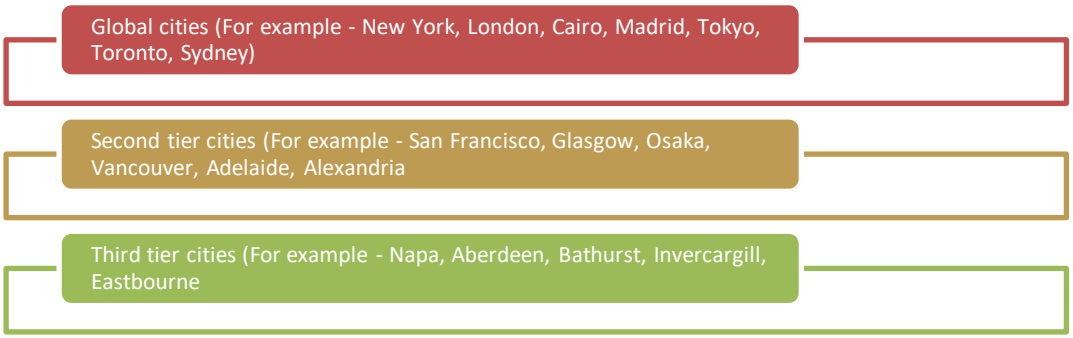

Figure 1: Global, second tier and third tier cities

To provide clarity in the definitions: first tier – or global cities - are New York, London, Tokyo and Sydney. As confirmed by Saskia Sassen, these global cities are also globalizing (Sassen, 2009) and categorized by sameness, including being the home of corporate headquarters and stock markets (Sassen, 1995; Sassen, 2005; Sassen, 2016). As shown by John Urry (2007), hyper-mobile people move between these cities. These cities enfold many universities, a large population, and a diversity of industries. Second tier cities include Adelaide, Brisbane, Melbourne, Perth, Wellington, Manchester, Vancouver and Osaka. They encase two to five universities, are pleasant places to live, have strong transportation systems, and well serviced, and maintain a diverse employment base. Defined relationally from global cities, they gain from the aggregation of services. They also have spikes in fame, such as Liverpool and the Beatles, Seattle and grunge, or Manchester in acid house. A key book from Markusen, Lee and DiGiovanna (1999) provided the theory of distinctiveness for this mode of urbanity.

Third tier cities are located in the regions – outside of the major population centres - of nations and can be rural. They enfold small populations, and are – or were - one-

industry towns, sometimes at the edge of global cities. London and Luton are examples. But these small cities can also be separated from a major city by some distance. In Queensland, Rockhampton, Bundaberg, Gladstone and Townsville are hundreds of kilometres from Brisbane. The universities present in these cities feature enormous advantages for academics and students, including cheap(er) housing and smaller student numbers to support a diversity of colleagues and roles. There is a much more direct engagement between diverse industries and local government, and communication systems are more direct.

Third tier cities are deeply neglected in the research literature. The event management and tourism scholars grant them attention. David Bell and Mark Jayne's 2006 monograph is the book of the field, *Small Cities: Urban Experience beyond the metropolis* (2006). Event management is crucial to these small cities, as employment is neither stable nor diverse. They are not internationally branded or known. Many are confronting deindustrialization, depopulation, environmental damage and decrepit infrastructure. Global cities continue to do well, attracting the money, businesses, and well-educated population. This imbalance in population and services creates deep inequalities and imbalances of wealth. Third tier cities are left with the poor, the less educated, the less mobile and the less skilled. They are places of residuals, waste and deficits. As Howell realized, "large populations bring their own amenities and agglomeration effects … making consolidated cities more attractive" (2014). Third tier cites do not have this agglomeration. They feature a single university or the regional campus of a second-tier or global city.

There is a provocative maxim to consider: the smaller the city, the more important the university. While second tier cities – like Melbourne, Adelaide, Brisbane or Perth – have multiple institutions, and global cities like Sydney feature a matrix of further and higher education options, the small cities often feature only one university, or the outlier campus of a larger university. Even with these restrictions and limitations, they provide a valuable contribution to a region. John Hogan, the registrar at Newcastle University in the United Kingdom, verified the accuracy of this assumption about universities and small cities.

> Imperial [College London] is a fantastic institution, but if it closed, would London notice? Probably not. But if Newcastle closed, or Northumbria, Durham, Teesside or Sunderland [universities] closed, it would be a catastrophe for the local and the bigger region, because there's not a lot else going on in the North East … The relative importance of these universities is so much more important than some of the outstanding institutions you might find in London (2012, 8).

This role is increasingly crucial because, as Richard Muir from the Institute for Public Policy Research revealed, regional inequality increases when public spending declines.

Therefore, in a declining economy, regional injustices heighten, and at such a time, the economic role and significance of a university is amplified.

> The dearth of education in many post-industrial cities helps explain why these places have had such trouble reinventing themselves. They've also suffered because their model of having vast firms in a single industry stunts entrepreneurship and innovation (Muir in Cunnane, 2012)

This is the double bind. A single industry employed a city's workers, but there were few opportunities to retrain, because of the lack of educational opportunities. Cities with skilled workers increased their skill. Others suffer and decline as the educated, the skilled, the young and the tax payers leave one location and move to another.

Third tier cities are not only neglected in the research literature, but lack infrastructural and policy support. It is difficult for these areas to gain an identity and image. There are problems. These small cities and large towns are incredibly diverse in shape, population size and economic 'development.' Erickcek and McKinney located and categorized eight types of small cities:

1. Dominated by an older industry in decline.
2. Private-sector dependent, with little public sector employment.
3. Dispersed geography and function.
4. Company towns attempting to survive when a company leaves.
5. University and college cities where graduates leave after graduation.
6. Company towns surviving after the company leaves, but with a remaining social purpose.
7. Cities growing through the engine of the new economy and creative industries.
8. Cities growing through university/government/business clusters. (2004, 14-22)

One key to this modelling is the defining role of universities in their taxonomy. Two of the eight categories invoke the role of a university in the city, and its function in the attraction and retention of the population. The differentiation is that one small city holds its graduates. The other does not. Third tier cities were successful in the manufacturing / industrial age, but have failed in the new knowledge economy. Mono-industrial dominance – such as manufacturing cars or textiles – was useful and profitable through the industrial revolution. But in a time of mobile capital and globalization, this singular focus results in employment reduction and instability, and a decline in population, including a difficulty in attracting new residents and holding young people. The question, raised by Beth Siegel and Andy Waxman, is whether this decline is (un)stoppable.

> Unfortunately for these cities, many of the sources of strength that they drew upon in their heyday are now disadvantages in the New Economy. For example, their rich industrial heritage was the result of large, densely built factories that were

> constructed to take advantage of the transportation modes of the day – waterways and railroads. In the New Economy, employers prefer an entirely different sort of location – sprawling one-story buildings near highways and advanced telecommunications lines, or in larger, more vibrant cities … As jobs moved out of these small cities, a host of other problems followed: declining population, loss of the middle class, abandoned mill buildings with environmental legacies, struggling downtowns, a shrinking tax base, and fewer employment opportunities (2001).

While recognizing and diagnosing these challenges in third tier cities, there is no checklist for recovery. Transferability of strategies is difficult to predict or apply as the differences in the history, population and economic conditions are so divergent. As David Bell and Mark Jayne realized,

> Small cities have been ignored by urban theorists who, in seeking to conceptualize broad urban agendas and depict generalizable models (for example relating to epochal urbanism, the structure and nature of the urban hierarchy, global cities and global city-regions), have tended to obscure as much as they illuminate. Given that study of 'the city' has been vital to broader advances in the social sciences, this neglect of smaller urban centres has profound consequences for urban studies (2009, 683).

Unspecified in their research is the consequences of the neglected relationship between urban studies and higher education studies. The *Universities Accord* document continued this analytical disconnection, bundling an array of inequalities into a deficit model of living and learning. Actually, a careful understanding of small cities and the universities that house them, and how these small city universities arc, slot and engage with remote and very remote environments, remains the key to transformational educational policy.

Only when understanding the diversity of regional, rural and remote environments – using the city imaging literature in particular that spans through education, tourism, regional development and agribusiness – can the unique positioning of higher education be studied, understood and embedded with care, precision and clarity in both policy development and university governance. The next component of this article explores the consequences of clustering the very specific theorizations of regional, rural and remote locations with other sociological nodes of disempowerment.

The Perpetuation of Deficit Ideology of Teaching, Learning and Research

I have been employed as an academic in ten posts in four countries throughout my career. Five of these posts have been in regional universities in Australia, the United

Kingdom and Canada. Of the other five, two of the institutions had regional campuses alongside the 'main' location. I have chosen this pathway through my professional life because if standards, quality assurance and excellence matter to international higher education, then focus, attention, great policy and high-quality teachers and researchers must be part of these regional universities.

This section began with this personal and professional information to confirm that I am not a bystander or a disinterested observer of regional education. I have lived and worked in these locations, committing to the extraordinary communities that encircle these institutions. I have worked for the challenging and frequently un(der)qualified leadership found in these universities. I have seen – and participated in solving – research integrity challenges. I have built teaching, learning and research relationships between small regional city councils and their university. These places are meaningful to me. So are the citizens in these places.

The 2024 *Universities Accord* included 489 mentions of 'region,' 'regions,' or 'regional.' The overwhelming majority of these nouns and adjectives were used to locate problems, challenges, concerns, errors, flaws and mis-steps. RRR environments are places of decline, inadequacy and - yes - deficit. But what is the deficit model of teaching and learning, and how does it operate in these marginalized locations? The deficit model of teaching and learning clusters into an ideology that a person is incomplete – unfinished – before they enter a formal educational institution. Through particular sociological markers, they exist in a lack, an absence, underdeveloped and inchoate. An educator is required to bring them 'up' to the required standards of not only knowledge, but life, learning, and citizenship. This mode of thinking and configuring pedagogy, andragogy and curriculum, results in reinforcing existing social injustices and economic injustices. But the *University Accord* document, bundling regional, rural and remote environments with other social inequalities, ensures that this assumption was perpetuated and – indeed – reinforced. The students enrolled in global and second tier universities were granted greater levels of autonomy, individuality and confidence in their pathways through education. They did not confront the multiplicity of labels locating deficiency and lack.

The consequences of overlaying these characteristics without deep, reflexive and responsive analysis and interpretation is that the deficit model of teaching and learning perpetuates and intensifies the oppressions and inequalities. This generalized othering assumes that the inequalities confronting students at the Mandurah campus of Murdoch University are equivalent in their social, economic and infrastructural challenges to the Nhulunbuy campus of Charles Darwin University. A health placement in Dubbo is rendered equivalent to one in Mount Gambier. Such structures perpetuate neocolonialism, misogyny, ageism and validates a particular version of both modernity and urbanity.

I have deployed the word 'deficit' in a singular formation in the above paragraphs. There are actually two modes of deficit: deficit theories and deficit ideologies. Deficit

theories jut from phrases such as 'minority education' and 'multicultural education.' Derived from an immigration policy environment that did not provide sufficient support, care and respect for diverse citizens upon their arrival into a nation, deficit theories were used to understand how diverse languages – and non-nationally valued languages – operate in a classroom (Collins, 1998; Dudley-Marling, 2007; Gorski, 2009). 'New migrants' were socialized into national languages and educational systems, but this teaching and learning was actioned to bring migrants to a particular – xenophobic – national 'standard.'

The deficit ideology is distinct and is applied through the *Accord* document. It involves applying 'context-blind standards' and quality assurance protocols (Sleeter, 2004). Therefore, if individuals cannot meet these 'standards,' then the blame is placed on the marginalized and disempowered learner, individual and citizen. This displacement reduces and shifts the blame for structural injustices from policy makers, governments and even universities, and onto individuals.

Both deficit models and ideologies target individuals without a deep critique of policies, procedures, systems, and structures. The power of 'leadership,' including teachers, is increased, rather than enacting deep expertise, understanding and analysis of the pathway of learners to learning. There are proxies for deficit models and ideologies of teaching and learning, including attrition rates, and a lack of social diversity in a particular subject, discipline, degree, or cohort. The deficit is so successful that particular citizens do not even apply to enrol in an institution. They have embedded, internalized, and believed their exclusion and the rationale for it. Sociological examples of this deep exclusion include women in physics, but also Indigenous citizens in doctoral programmes. A difference is reforged as a deficit. This is not 'about' individual teachers or institutions. To change this pattern requires a recalibration of the confusion between homology and standards. Teachers must litigate their personal and professional background, trajectory, and expectations. When academics in particular – who rarely hold educational qualifications – continue to teach as they were taught, prior injustices are continued without critique and reflection. Significantly, the *Accord* document focused their interventions on study centres and educational technology. The qualifications and professional development of academics were not addressed. Legacy architecture, including intellectual architecture, will continue without interventions. Paul Gorski analysed this reality, realizing that such assumptions are "recycling … misperceptions, all of which justify inequalities" (2010, 6). For much of the last twenty years, digital technology and interfaces have been summoned as the solution to educational problems. Whether WebCT, Blackboard or Canvas, to summon Learning Management Systems, or Google, Wikipedia or Generative AI, technology has been activated to answer educational issues that are undergirded by deficit ideologies. Such solutions are understandable, cheap, and easy. Neoliberalism has rendered higher education vulnerable (Chandler and Reid, 2016) to simplified renderings of 'graduate outcomes.' Instead of economic efficiency, there are other trajectories. As Bath et al.

confirmed, there are alternative strategies through action learning to create a "living curriculum" (2004).

Noting the undergirding of deficit ideologies and modes in university application, progression, and examination policies and procedures, how can these injustices be addressed? Janice Lombardi (2016) offered clear, precise, and powerful initiatives to interrupt the deficit model. She did not focus on the students and their 'failures.' Instead, attention was placed on teachers and their expectations. When teachers – often implicitly or unconsciously – align particular sociological characteristics in an educational setting, then those students are less likely to be successful. A teacher's assumptions are the fuel that allows the deficit strategies to be perpetuated. They continue whenever words like 'minority,' 'disadvantaged,' 'remedial,' or 'at risk' are used.

Lombardi provided five strategies to manage the deficit model and block this language and the assumptions that come from it.

- Show students they can reach high levels of achievement
- Generate intermediate goals to accelerate success
- Assist students in managing their fear of failure
- Create data-let short-term successes
- Produce scaffolded instruction (2016).

Low stakes assessment, selection of multimodal, artefact and exegetical assessment tasks, and providing diverse scaffolding and pathways to academic achievement and success are all clear options to activate her strategies. Through creating learning spaces for differentiated learning, scaffolded assessment, silence and listening, deficit models can be displaced. Significantly, the *Universities Accord* did not present or engage with any of these issues. Once more, digitized technologies were a solution to any educational barrier. Indeed, a 'National' Regional University – paradox or tautology? – was proposed, fuelled by learning management systems. That is, a national ideology – or an imagined community to cite Anderson (1991) – is imposed on very different students, academics and locations (Brabazon & Ewart, 2024).

This alternative strategy is described as the "abundance model" of teaching and learning (Alber, 2013). This paradigm has four characteristics.

- Every student possesses skills and abilities
- A bespoke and customized model of instruction
- Recognize standards are different from standardization
- Confirm that all learning builds on existing strengths and interests (Alber, 2013).

These four interventions in teaching and learning ensure that the subjectivities of teachers are reviewed and questioned. This is the way to displace what Beth Harry and

Janette Klingner described as "the social/cultural deficit lens" (2007). New ways of seeing, listening and living are revealed. Significantly, the *Accord* documents place little attention on academic qualifications, professional development, curricula design or innovative assessment. Instead, it restates the deficit ideologies of the students, and clumps together an array of sociological variable and / in regional, rural and remote locations.

The deficit model of teaching and learning is deployed to understand and 'justify' why disempowered communities - as configured through class, race, gender, sexuality, age, disability or geographic location - continue to 'underperform' in universities. This ideology was configured through the confusion of access and participation in higher education, alongside the confusion between standardization and the maintenance of standards. These two binaries – access / participation and standardization / standards – are mapped over the other unproductive binary oppositions of city / country, centre / periphery, exciting / banal, and innovative / nostalgic. There are multiple layers of injustice that texture the regional, rural, and remote landscape. For example, gender remains a significant variable in the perpetuation of inequality, masking women's contributions to and for their communities (Alston, 2006; Crimmins, Casey, McIntyre, 2020). Further, Morell and Bock revealed that when rural women are seen, they become "victims of the combined pressure of capitalism and patriarchy" (2008, 5-6). Their history and contributions to economic, social, and educational life are displaced, minimized or erased, and evaluated in comparison to supposedly normative urban infrastructure, conditions and a context.

These locations – through the piling of binary oppositions to form ideologies – create an educational culture of deficit, of less and of lack. However, theories of rurality, regionality and the remote transform through the critical lenses of postcolonialism and feminism, alongside a sensitivity to the political economy. When re-visioned beyond the deficit lens, rurality, regionality and the remote reveal and activate a specific international and trans-local trajectory, to open and welcome autonomy outside of the constricting frame of urbanity.

Instead of professional, personal and intellectual cookie cutters impressed on land, language and culture through convenience rather than care, there are alternative stories, pathways and policies to recognize and reveal. To hear and see these stories requires parking the simple binary oppositions, and the ideology of a deficit. Histories and geographies align, converge, disconnect and agitate, exfoliating the alternative stories that block the easy validation of one set of ideas over others. Yes, the rural, regional and remote must manage uneven – at best – health and education services. Donald Trump voters lived and live in these locations and expressed and express their anger through displacement and scapegoating (Brabazon et al. 2018). Depopulation is real, meaningful and reduces the tax base. Still, such narratives and labels are what Hallinan and Judd have described as "racialized thinking (2009, 1220), configuring particular narratives of progress that shadow

– uncomfortably if predictably – colonizing histories that are fuelled by absences, gaps and silences.

It is time to research differences and differently. Particularly, critical theory is summoned to speak back to the fading theoretical rigour of the contemporary research landscape that applies reified metrics of impact and engagement. When aligned, it is possible to reclaim the invisibilities of life and intellectual culture, locating and validating the marginal, the forgotten, the demeaned and the discredited that is not seen, researched or understood in national research policies or funding priorities. The regional, rural and remote are not only recognized but re-evaluated for their role in transforming contemporary debates of sustainability, economic 'development' and the very foundational concept of 'growth.' Applying an 'abundance' model of teaching and learning, this project re-visions, reorients and reimages higher education from the perspective of regional, rural and remote environments.

Beyond the Deficit Model: Revisioning Regional, Rural and Remote Universities and Their Communities through Translocalism

RRR universities are crucial to the foundational reconfiguration of deficit ideologies. Birch, Perry and Taylor refer to universities as "anchor institutions" (2013). For local governments, this anchor enables planning and stable collaborations. Imposing neoliberal tropes – such as competition, international rankings and job-ready graduates – is not grasping the specific role these institutions play in not only a location and region, but for developing place-based teaching, learning and research. Small cities can never compete with the second tier and global cities for corporate investment. Competition is not the point or goal. Third-tier cities and towns, and the universities that punctuate them, are invisible in corporate rankings and brandings. Apply 'marketing strategies' deployed for Imperial College, the Australian National University, or the University of Toronto on Paisley (and the University of the West of Scotland), Windsor (and the University of Windsor) or Renmark (and Flinders University) is not useful. But international profile and branding is not the point of higher education. One rationale of configuring new research metrics – such as impact and engagement – was to ensure that inelegant proxies about journals and rankings did not mask alternative pathways to excellence, meaning and mattering.

Configuring the rural and regional as backward, summoning the cascading identities of redneck, yahoo, gronk or bogan (depending on the nation), requires correction. The problem with the regional, rural and remote being configured through a deficit model and the citizens that live in these locations being coded as deficient in terms of academic ability, economic stability and international branding, is how this ideological problem - this invented problem - is solved. Since the neoliberal infusion of government and education through Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, the market economy - rather

than public services – is summoned to rectify the weaknesses and deficits. The market economy and the profit motive are the strategies configured to solve problems that the market economy and the profit motive created.

While this article probes the *Accord*, there is a wider international theory to frame and encircle the Australian experience and specificity. Jason Cervone's remarkable monograph, *Corporatizing rural education: neoliberal globalization and reaction in the United States* (2017) argued that these rural and regional towns and cities have been buffeted by the waves of neoliberal globalization. Corporations have logged the brittle nature of the economy in these areas and moved in to exploit the situation. Cervone argues that, "the corporatization of rural schools is based in the same ideology that has affected rural communities throughout US history, the ideology that shapes rural communities as backward and in need of modernization" (2017, 16).

This is a powerful and important analysis. Configuring the rural and regional as backward opens these environments to market-driven and profit-motivated 'programmes' for modernization. The rural and regional are configured through a deficit model and this lens perpetuates a lie: that citizens outside of large metropolitan centres are also in deficit, and require the market economy – rather than public services – to rectify the weaknesses and lack.

The anger created through such neglect and labelling can create – as with Donald Trump's election – the appearance of what Cervone described as, "a large population of angry, white men and women" (2017, 1). The erasure of the voices and views of the white working class, which was also researched by Winlow and Hall in *The death of the left* (2022), has revealed profound consequences politically, socially and economically. Cervone diagnosed the challenge in regional, rural and remote areas as "the pedagogy of sacrifice" (2017, 88), where neoliberalism and specific faith structures create a fundamentalism that renders outsiders – including migrants - an enemy and intensifies victimhood.

The labelling of 'rednecks' therefore has nothing to do with the reality or lived experience of rural, regional or remote environments, and instead is a product of configuring these spaces and the people within them as lacking, underdeveloped and anti-modern. The type of university that exists in these struggling third tier cities is - so often - a struggling university. The Vice Chancellor and senior staff that are hired are often inexperienced, or hold a very narrow range of qualifications and expertise (Brabazon, 2021). It is their first post at that level, or it is their last payday before retirement. Unfortunate consequences emerge from this appointment process (Burge, 2022, ICAC, 2020). Fields of candidates for appointments are smaller. Attracting staff to live in these small cities, away from the facilities in larger urban environments, is challenging. If they are hired, then some of the staff become part of the FIFO (Fly In Fly Out) academic workforce, not living permanently in the location of their employment.

There are five strengths of regional universities.

1. It is easier to gain a permanent position.
2. It is a place to gain a great diversity of opportunities and build a CV.
3. There are great opportunities to build deep relationships with community partners.
4. Relationships with academic colleagues and professional staff and close and profound. The learning arc is both great and rapid.
5. Promotions are easier.

There are also five weaknesses in regional universities.

1. Poor leadership and management.
2. There are not alternative universities in the area to move to if the institution confronts difficulties.
3. There are fewer employment options outside of the university sector.
4. Partners of academics confront challenges finding academic work without spousal policies.
5. Health and educational options are limited, raising challenges for academic with families and school-aged children.

Concretizing these strengths and weaknesses for individual academics, they must confront the difficulty of moving house, and then managing the 'Two-Body Problem' (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2004). A sizeable minority of academics are married to other academics. Without spousal policies, one member of the academic partnership will be unemployed, underemployed, or living separately from the family for an extended period to enable the spouse to accept a post at a regional university. This is neither stable nor sustainable and involves trading personal support and happiness for professional achievement. Noting the specific challenges logged in the *University Accord*, including a stable population and a lack of a skilled working population in the regions which was mentioned 51 times in the Report, the lack of any attention to spousal policies in regional universities is strange, short-sighted and – once more – allowing a deficit ideology to frame and shape these institutions. If spousal policies were introduced in the 7 Regional University Network (RUN) institutions, and Charles Darwin University, the most remote university in the nation that has decided to not align with the other regional campuses, then these institutions would immediately improve the quality of their appointments, reduce staff turnover, and ensure a more stable population for the region. That singular decision would change the future of these universities and their towns and cities. But because of

the inexperienced and / or poor leadership in these institutions, the capacity to innovate and create positive strategies for these different locations is not an option, or even proposed in the *Accord*. With no attention to teachers and teaching, displacing the focus on educational technology (Brabazon, 2002; Brabazon, 2008; Brabazon, 2013), and limiting research to 'job ready graduates' and STEM, the diversity and power of place-based learning and scholarship is reduced.

If higher education researchers and policy makers take place-based education seriously, then there needs to be a (post)deficit ideological reckoning and realization that teaching and learning and research emerges from a location. If variables and ideologies such as impact and engagement are to be taken seriously, then there needs to be a differentiated recognition that impact and engagement in Sydney at the University of Sydney is distinct from the impact and engagement at the Emerald campus of Central Queensland University. It is time to critique the assumption – the deficit ideology – that global cities and the universities in them are the keepers of standards. Particular ideologies cluster in large cities, and the universities within them. These are often proxies for class, whiteness, masculinity and heteronormativity. But we must not conflate the ideologies of those places with quality assurance and standards. Strong governance can activate and welcome plurality and diversity while confirming standards.

Instead, inadequate, inexperienced or underperforming leadership in third tier cities uses these small universities to build their profile. It is a stepping stone in a pyramidal career. Because leaders in Australia's regional universities are lacking teaching and learning qualifications and research expertise, generic metrics are applied over intricate – and often long-standing – economic, social, environmental and educational issues. The requirements of leadership in regional universities differ from metropolitan universities. It requires the capacity to build a bespoke and customized place-based set of policies that align with national standards and policies. As shown in the previous sections of this article, deficit ideologies are applied to students from academic and professional staff. Deficit leadership is the font of this displacement.

University leadership is easier in the second tier and in global cities. These cities and institutions have research infrastructure and well qualified professional staff to ensure the quality and maintenance of educational systems. There is employment and health support for staff, spouses and families. Alumni fund a series of initiatives, and a larger pool of resources is available. All leaders make errors. When leaders in regional locations make errors, they are more serious, as there is less money to manage the mistake and create a recovery plan. Therefore, risk mitigation is much more complex in regional, rural and remote environments. But also, the confusion of standardization with standards is problematic. The bias and ranking of particular disciplines and subjects hurts the RRR environment. With all the attention on 'medical placements' in the *Universities Accord* document, the economic and political infrastructure created from teaching and research in

agribusiness, climate systems, food technology, event management and sports tourism is forgotten. Simply because a discipline is not valued or taught at ANU or Manchester University does not mean that it is not an important knowledge system. The research metrics deployed in experimental physics or the medical sciences are not generalizable. Success in the disciplines that are meaningful and relevant to regional, rural and remote environments will not be reinforced through journal rankings or citation metrics. Instead, Platinum Open Access Journals, where the publication of the research is free for researchers and readers, are valuable in these RRR institutions that rarely have the library funding to purchase the corporate bundles of academic publications. But further, these materials are available for a diversity of stakeholders, online and at no charge. That metric – of social justice and equitable distribution of academic knowledge – is not measured by institutional rankings or research metrics.

If RRR higher education is investigated on its own terms, in its own words, while recognizing the specificity of its history, then it is no longer 'a problem' to be 'managed.' Instead, the differences are valued and disseminated on its own terms. Through theories of translocalism, a different way of thinking about space, place, history, identity, and knowledge can emerge. The term translocalism has a powerful intellectual history, but it is being used in this article to recover and build the horizontal mobility between regional, rural and remote environments, and third tier cities universities. The knowledge, initiatives and best practice that exists in one institution are available for the consideration of another small institution. As argued through this article, the capacity for generalizable city modelling is difficult to apply in the third tier cities, because of their distinctive, often (post)industrial, histories. But as revealed in the third tier city taxonomy presented earlier in this article, two of the eight categories involve universities. Therefore, for these institutions, one that can hold graduates and one that does not, initiatives, strategies and policies that work well can be shared for the evaluation and perhaps implementation of others on the third tier.

Most frequently connected with the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, translocalism is a bridging concept spanning the humanities and the social sciences. Geertz recognized and affirmed the value of the local. In 1983, he stated that, "the shapes of knowledge are always ineluctably local, indivisible from their instruments and encasements" (1983). His work located "general principles" (1983) while also valuing specificity and distinction.

Working from these general principles, Mobility Studies grew in importance through the 1990s and 2000s, particularly through the work of John Urry (2007). Migration became more complex post September 11, and globalization gained increasingly diverse definitions through neoliberalism, enabling the movement of money and goods but restricting the migration of people. Translocalism – as a trope – offers a strategy to recognize distinctiveness and local specificity, but also allows researchers and citizens to understand, map and track new models of interconnected.

Translocalism activates the social and spatial processes that form identity, goods, services, and ideas across boundaries. It tracks how mobility changes our understanding of self, space, and place. What makes this concept distinctive from mobility, connectiveness, flow or transfer - all words with important literatures - is that translocalism maintains the integrity and distinctiveness of the local environment, as it moves. Brickell and Datta described this as "situatedness during mobility" (2011). This means our narratives – our imaginings of a place – maintain integrity as we move. While the term can be used theoretically, it is also employed empirically to understand international migration and the movement of populations, food and goods between remote, regional, rural and urban environments. It challenges easy binary oppositions of space and place, rural and urban, core and periphery. It also problematizes the nation state as the primary frame through which to understand identity, economics, education and power. The local transcends the priorities - and the biases - of the national by building links with other locals. This is a co-production of knowledge, which is so important to regional, rural and remote universities. Lacking the financial stability of second tier and global cities, the capacity to trial ideas in one RRR location and share the outcomes with other trans-local partners is both efficient and respectful.

Translocalism demands more of us as scholars and citizens. We must understand the local conditions – in their texture and richness - and do the heavy lifting required to enable those ideas to move between meaningful contexts. Translocalism ensures the strategies deployed in the *Universities Accord* – of deficit ideologies and assuming that policies, procedures and mandates can be ripped from one place and clicked into another – can be discredited. In a time where digitization enables effortless movement of textual systems, translocalism asks that we as scholars and citizens pause and consider the context of ideas and whether they can or should move. This is not only crucial in the enabling of postcolonial research, ensuring a tight management of appropriate dissemination, but also a respect for situated knowledge. Translocalism is not a celebration of movement, mobility, digitization, or globalization. It is a way to share, with integrity, horizontal knowledges of regional, rural and remote locations that may be neglected in particular nations, but have the capacity, rigour and contextual consciousness to acknowledge, understand, respect, replicate or transform other similarly marginalized locations.

A Future for Governance in the Regional University

The regional, rural and remote actualize what Stuart Hall and others described as "the career of a label" (2017, 31). A label demeans, minimizes and simplifies. New critical social theory and critical geography are required to agitate, question and undermine the framing of the regional, rural and remote as deficient. These locations are not a spatial abstraction, or an outback, or a 'wild west.' Instead, they confirm the complexity and

diversity of modernity. No easy 'others' are constructed, to perpetuate simplistic labelling and judgement. Robert Chambers' remarkable study of rural development demonstrates the unproductive division between urban and rural, core and peripheral knowledge (2013). He showed the value when scholars position the rural, regional and remote as a priority – a first lens - in our thinking and consideration, rather than perpetuating easy ideologies, active forgetting or residual neglect.

Leadership matters to this discussion. There are "cores and peripheries of knowledge" (Chambers 2013, 4). Consider how professions – and the education of professionals – transform when regional, rural and remote locations, experiences and place-making are the first lens. These locations are not a case study, a placement opportunity, or an explanatory footnote. Scholars cannot apply 'translational' research to these highly diverse places. Intricate translocalism is required. The small populations rarely hold relevance and advocacy power in national policy. But through innovative, creative and engaged "placemaking" (Richards and Duif, 2018, 16), translocalism can be rejuvenated and renewed, creating sensitive, textured landscapes of emotion and knowledge, beyond the contaminations of neoliberal globalization. As Scribano, Luhrs and Cervio confirm (2021), it is time to build new relationships between bodies, emotions and politics, and explore how communities are sharing time as much as space.

The leadership that emerges in regional, rural and remote locations must manage intricate, confusing and challenging decisions, and Black Swan events that are not taught or expressed in the refereed literature from branded business schools and faculties. Market forces buffet regional, rural and remote locations, so that the economy becomes brittle, too dependent on a few industries, and open to exploitation from corporations. Neoliberalism intensifies in these locations, through a lack of public infrastructure and visibility. But while neoliberalism activates a domination of the free market and profit motive, it requires anti-statism and anti-regulation to gain a foothold and a role. The active exploitation that emerges from a lack of state intervention in injustice results in shortcuts and injustices in a range of services, spanning from prisons and correction services, through to child protection, disability services, health and education. While the Global Financial Crisis in 2008 was the peak moment of this unregulated ideology (Tett, 2009) – fuelled by unsecured loans and derivatives trading – the fundamental weaknesses of neoliberalism continued as a zombie policy, offering shambling critiques of public health and educational initiatives. Now is the time to return to the importance of governance, regulation and the public good.

Such a transformation is configured, as argued by Valeria Lingua and Verena Balz, through a reimagining of regional governance and planning frameworks (2020, 1). Regional, rural, and remote scales of planning and governments are different and distinct. A consciousness of these differences requires "governance rescaling" (Linguia and Balz, 2020, 2). They argue that specific geographical realities require differentiated, spatial planning solutions. This is a different mode of visualizing design and leadership. Moving

beyond competitiveness and sustainable 'growth,' new opportunities emerge for what Cavaco and Costa describe as "soft spaces and soft planning" (2020, 87). Beyond nationalism and globalization, a devolution of scale offers a reimagining of place and potential.

Leadership is not an identity. It is a set of behaviours, practices, theories and vocabularies. It has a history and a geography. Commencing with 'Great Man' narratives in the middle of the 19th century, behavioural theories dominated after the Second World War, defining, developing and teaching transactional and transformational leadership models in the 1970s. Alongside the 'Greed is Good' 1980s burst through charismatic leadership (Antonakis, Fenley and Liechti, 2012), to be followed with a diversity of adjectives that operate in our present: authentic leadership (Gardner et al., 2011), servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1991), spiritual leadership and diverse leadership. Clearly, leadership models gather the fashionable lexicons in a particular time and place and continue rolling to the next crisis, while replaying these historic terms and ideologies. Most models emerge through the disciplinary parameters of business, economics, finance or commerce. Instead, a distinctive leadership trope is offered through this article, that is both appropriate and meaningful for citizens and universities in regional, rural and remote locations. It is not generalizable without reflection and consciousness of translocalism. Contextual relevance is key.

Often – too often – when the word leadership is used, it is a mirror on the speaker. It is a performance or mask of a specific life narrative, context, experience, and history. It also – through absence – marginalizes other ways of thinking, working and living. The challenge remains in transforming positional power through disintermediation and horizontal models of knowledge sharing and development. Legitimation through qualifications, titles and salaries is the simplest modes of validation, which are most easily poured into the vessel of a white heterosexual man. This mode of colonialism – and recognizing the importance of Geertz - must be (re)framed by translocalism. Nationalism crushes difference, diversity, and alternative pathways of living (Chatterjee, 1993). Therefore, alternative spaces, places, languages and labelling are excavated from the landscape.

Access is a tough word to implement. It is similar to the word opportunity. If access and opportunity become boxes to tick, then deeper responsibilities are evaded that require revisiting the inequalities of the past. There is an alternative. In 2019, a book was published by Yusef Waghid, titled *Towards a philosophy of caring in higher education: pedagogy and nuances of care* (2019). He argues that citizens should not only focus on individual care, but a care infrastructure. Such an infrastructure does not activate individual choice: a person deciding to care or not care. Instead, he argued for the creation of reciprocal processes of care that are agile, and are not truncated by fixed roles and responsibilities. Caring has a strong seam in the philosophy of education, but is of minor

influence in leadership studies and regional development policies. Instead of care, stretch targets, Key Performance Indicators, and a diversity of metrics codify power relationships and results.

Freire is important to the development of this theory of leadership built on this infrastructure of care. His *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (1996) and *Pedagogy of freedom* (2000) are books of the 20th century. Freire offers three stages for a caring infrastructure.

1. The importance of care for students and authentic teaching, so that students become bold and adventurous.
2. Teachers are therapeutic in their engagements with students when they suffer or experience disquiet.
3. Development of an ethical responsibility so that students and teachers stand up for justice and speak out against human misery, suffering and exploitation (Freire, 2018).

Notice that this is student-centred, and student-led care. Students are not marginalized or in deficit. Ethical responsibilities build alignments between teachers and students. Words like 'minority' demean and undermine intricate and just policies, initiatives and imperatives. For example, two-thirds of the Australian population live in major cities. This statement renders Australia to be one of the most urbanized populations in the world, with one of the lowest population densities outside of the major cities. But changes are emerging (ABS, 2021). What this population distribution means is that most of the population can forget about the regional, the rural and the remote in daily life.

Report after report, accord after accord, will be released, diagnosing 'failing' regional universities and proposing a series of top-down solutions involving a 'national' regional university and educational technology. While there is no attention to improving the leadership of regional universities, or addressing a whole-of-career policy for academics to reduce the churn of staff, including spousal policies, these universities will not improve, because they cannot as measured by inappropriate metrics derived from and written for metropolitan centres and globalized ranking. There is no singular strategy for success, or failure, or care (McAlary, 2021). Instead, by welcoming the innovative theories from city imaging, translocalism, post-corporatization and the infrastructure of care, a different way of living and learning is summoned.

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