

Chapter 5

Conclusions and Recommendations

...the key factor contributing to making rural education different from urban education is geographic, and more specifically the need to deal with a range of challenges, some real others perceived, created by distance. While the impact of the *tyranny of distance* on Australian society has been well explained...its significance is not yet fully understood by policy makers. Distance has created a significant divide in Australia between metropolitan Australia and rural Australia – a divide that is ever increasing and resulting in inequalities that should not exist in a first world economy.¹

5.1 Education plays a key role in developing sustainable and vibrant rural and regional communities in Australia. Access to educational opportunities in these centres is critical for attracting families to, and retaining families in, these communities. Educational institutions provide employment and contribute to the local economy. The presence of educational opportunities raises the aspirations of the community as a whole.

5.2 The committee recognises there is work being done to minimise the divide between rural and regional students in relation to access to both secondary and tertiary educational opportunities. However, this divide between rural and regional, and metropolitan students still exists and the result is that rural and regional communities are suffering the consequences both economically and socially.

Secondary school

5.3 In relation to secondary school education, the committee heard of the significant difficulties that students had in obtaining access to educational opportunities. Predominantly the committee's deliberations centred on the difficulties in attracting and retaining suitably qualified teachers to rural and remote areas, but the committee also considered the considerable costs imposed on students and their families as they attempt to ensure that their children are able to have the same educational opportunities as students in metropolitan areas.

5.4 The committee heard stories of excellent initiatives making great inroads into the literacy and numeracy divide between rural and metropolitan students. The committee refers to the Quicksmart program described by Professor John Pegg, which in a 30 week program raised children's literacy levels two to four years. The disheartening aspect of the initiative was that it was subsequently discontinued in the school due to a complete turnover of staff.² Such examples highlight to the committee

1 Society for the Provision of Education in Rural Australia, *Submission 679*, p. 1.

2 *Committee Hansard*, 2 September 2009, p. 38.

that while there are many initiatives in existence which could assist rural and regional students, however, because there is no long term view, such measures fail.

5.5 The committee also heard of programs aimed at helping the most disadvantaged students. The committee commends Edmund Rice Education Australia for the outreach work and flexible learning centres which are providing educational opportunities to students who have otherwise disengaged from school altogether. The inspiring aspect of the program is its goals of social inclusion and using an educational framework to bring students into the community.

5.6 However, as the committee was told, such programs are localised, and resources are limited. As Mr Dale Murray of the Edmund Rice Education Australia explained to the committee, while his organisation had received invitations to establish outreach programs in other centres, as Mr Murray explained, 'there is a limit to how much four of us can do at a national level with this'.³

5.7 Obviously there is no quick and simple solution to these issues of inequitable access to educational opportunities. Governments at all levels have grappled with the issues of educational opportunities in rural and regional Australia. The committee's concern however is what the committee perceives to be a growing discontent with the level of secondary educational services in rural and regional areas. In particular, the committee believes the churn of professionals and their families through regional areas and the feelings that students will be getting a second class education in rural and regional areas are impacting significantly on those that remain in the community.

5.8 The committee therefore recommends that the Australian Government commission an investigation of the barriers to rural and regional secondary educational opportunities with a view to developing a long-term strategy to address the inequity in secondary educational opportunities in rural and regional Australia.

Recommendation 1

5.9 The committee recommends that the Australian Government commission an investigation into the barriers to rural and regional secondary educational opportunities with a view to developing a long-term strategy to address the inequity in secondary educational opportunities in rural and regional Australia.

Recommendation 2

5.10 In developing a long-term strategy to address the inequity in secondary education opportunities in rural and regional Australia, the committee recommends that consideration should be given to strategies for ensuring that literacy and numeracy programs, once introduced into schools, are able to be maintained within those schools.

Recommendation 3

3 *Committee Hansard*, 10 November 2009, p. 80.

5.11 The committee recommends that as part of the investigation into the barriers to rural and regional secondary educational opportunities with a view to developing a long-term strategy to address the inequity in secondary educational opportunities in rural and regional Australia, consideration should be given to whether the current level of funding under the AIC Scheme is appropriate.

Tertiary education

5.12 The majority of the evidence and submissions in this inquiry related to the barriers that rural and regional students face in accessing tertiary education opportunities. This focus was prompted by the Government's proposed changes to Youth Allowance, and in particular, the tightening of the workforce participation criteria for eligibility to independent Youth Allowance.

5.13 The committee repeats its view from its report on the Social Security and Other Legislation Amendment (Income Support for Students) Bill 2009 that it considers the proposal to remove the fixed amount in 18 months as a means of establishing independence for Youth Allowance has been poorly targeted and badly implemented.⁴

5.14 Access to independent Youth Allowance can be the determining factor in whether a student from rural and regional Australia attends tertiary education. There is no income support measure which specifically addresses the inequity that rural and regional students face in accessing tertiary education opportunities. The removal of the criteria for students to earn a fixed amount in 18 months to establish independence will therefore disadvantage many rural and regional students who aspire to tertiary education.

5.15 The committee believes it is important to recognise that this is not just a matter of financial cost. These are often students who have worked incredibly hard through their secondary school years to overcome the disadvantages in relation to access to secondary school educational opportunities described in this report. They are students who are prepared to defer their tertiary studies for 12 months and work hard in their gap year, often in three or four jobs, to earn the requisite amount to establish independence for the purposes of Youth Allowance. These are students who often

4 The committee also notes the recent Australian National Audit Office report into the Administration of Youth Allowance which recommended that the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations develop and use effectiveness indicators to identify and measure the achievement of Youth Allowance-related programs in providing appropriate income support and promoting education and training. The committee notes that the Department has agreed with this recommendation. See Australian National Audit Office, *Administration of Youth Allowance: Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations and Centrelink*, Audit Report No. 12 2009-10, November 2009.

come from farming families, families who are 'asset rich but cash poor'⁵ and who would not otherwise qualify for dependent Youth Allowance, families who have been suffering the effects of prolonged drought and are often not in a position to go further into debt to assist their children to access further education. These are students who are prepared to move away from home and their communities and their support networks, to study and live independently, in order to achieve tertiary education. These students deserve assistance.

5.16 In order to address this inequity, the committee recommends the introduction of a Tertiary Access Allowance for students who are required to move away from home. The Tertiary Access Allowance should be structured in the following way:

- be an annual payment of \$10,000, indexed to the Consumer Price Index.
- not be linked to a student's eligibility for any other income support payment.
- be available to any student required to move away from home to access the tertiary course of their choice.
- not be subject to a parental means or assets test.

Recommendation 4

5.17 The committee strongly recommends that the Australian Government introduce a Tertiary Access Allowance for students who are required to move away from home to access tertiary education.

5.18 The committee also heard that students who move away from home to attend university also face significant difficulties in accessing affordable housing close to campus. The committee understands that tertiary institutions would like to address this issue, however, are often unable to access the necessary capital.

5.19 The committee therefore recommends that the Australian Government investigate the establishment of a capital works program to assist tertiary institutions to increase the stock of affordable housing for students.

Recommendation 5

5.20 The committee recommends that the Australian Government investigate the establishment of a capital works program to assist tertiary institutions to increase the stock of affordable housing for students.

5.21 The committee also considered the significant financial difficulties that students can face in meeting expenses while on clinical placement or block release. This is an issue requiring further investigation with a view to implementing a form of temporary income support for students while they undertake these important

5 See Ms Jan Andrews, Deputy Chief Executive, Schools and Children's Services, South Australian Department of Education and Children's Services, *Committee Hansard*, 23 September 2009, p. 10.

components of their course. The committee therefore recommends that the Australian Government investigate the implementation of a form of temporary income support for students while they are on clinical placements or block release.

Recommendation 6

5.22 The committee recommends that the Australian Government investigate the implementation of a form of temporary income support for students while they are on clinical placements or block release.

5.23 The committee also considered the barriers to students accessing tertiary education options in regional Australia. Many of the issues that the committee considered in this part of the inquiry related to the costs and ability of institutions to provide a wide range of courses at regional locations.

5.24 The committee accepts that a full range of courses can not be delivered to students in rural and regional areas. However, the committee feels that there are many positive and innovative solutions to this issue currently being implemented or considered.

5.25 The committee understands that university funding and the structure of the tertiary education sector is currently in a transition phase. While the committee appreciates that some institutions may see benefits in these reforms, other institutions did express concern about the potential impact that these reforms would and this impacts on the ability of tertiary institutions to continue and expand on the courses they deliver to regional areas.

Recommendation 7

5.26 The committee recommend that a review be undertaken in 2013 to assess the impact of funding compacts, student-driven demand funding and the Structural Adjustment Fund on regional universities.

5.27 The committee also believes that expanding the range of courses is not the only means by which regional institutions can attract students. The committee's view is that there is value in implementing measures which provide incentives for students to choose to study at regional institutions.

Recommendation 8

5.28 The committee recommends that the Australian Government investigate options for attracting students to regional institutions, and encouraging graduates to work in rural and regional locations, through programs which provide for reduced HELP-HECS liability.

Senator Fiona Nash
Chair