



Thursday, 6 August, 2009

The Secretary  
Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee  
PO Box 6100  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

Email: [rrat.sen@aph.gov.au](mailto:rrat.sen@aph.gov.au)

Dear Secretary

**Re: Inquiry into Rural and Regional Access to Secondary and Tertiary Education Opportunities**

Southern Cross University is one of the few Australian universities that is regionally-based, with 60 percent of our students coming from a regional background. For these reasons, SCU has a special interest in this Inquiry.

The Committee may be aware that Southern Cross University, with Charles Sturt University, participated in the Needs Analysis for Stage 1 of the Feasibility Study into *A New National University in Regional Australia*. SCU remains committed to working with Government and the sector to find innovative solutions for improving access to, and participation in, higher education by people living in regional Australia.

**Overview of Southern Cross University**

Southern Cross University (SCU) is a regional University, with three campuses across northern New South Wales: the largest campus is in Lismore, and there are two smaller, and growing, campuses in Coffs Harbour and Tweed Heads. A new campus is under construction in the southern end of the Gold Coast and will have its first intake of students in 2010. Currently, around 15,500 students study on campus, at one of the four learning sites around Australia or through one of our offshore collaborations.

SCU has very strong links to its regions, and “constructive regional engagement” is one of our five key objectives in the University’s Strategic Plan. The University has active Memorandums of Understanding with eight local government authorities across our regional footprint, as well as an Office of Regional Engagement based at each campus.

**Professor Paul Clark Vice-Chancellor**

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Around 60 percent of SCU's students come from a regional or remote background, and 22.5 percent are from a low socio-economic background. There are significant numbers of students who study part-time (almost 40 percent), around one-third study externally, and fifteen percent are "multi-modal" (that is, studying a combination of on-campus and external units).

This distinctive student profile directly reflects SCU's mission and commitment as a regional university, and the University's contribution to choice and diversity for students as part of Australia's higher education sector.

### **Education alternatives**

The higher education participation rate for students from regional areas is much lower than those living in capital cities – 20 percent compared to 31 percent. Equally, it is clear that the physical presence of a university campus can be critical in raising educational aspirations and participation rates. This was demonstrated by the opening of the University of the Sunshine Coast in 1996. Over a ten-year period, the percentage of the Sunshine Coast population aged 15 – 24 enrolled at a university or other tertiary institution rose from 4.1 percent to 9.2 percent. As a former Deputy Vice-Chancellor of this University, I was able to experience first-hand the transformational impact the presence this university had on the Sunshine Coast.

With 60 percent of Southern Cross University's students coming from a regional background, it is clear that the education alternative that many of our students have chosen is to stay in the region, or to move to an SCU campus from another regional location. They exercise their choice to study at a regional campus rather than move to a metropolitan institution. While it is not possible to offer every discipline, students can access a broad range of courses at undergraduate or postgraduate level across SCU's nine Schools in an environment that promotes a strong research culture.

Distance education is, of course, one way in which many students (in both regional and metropolitan locations) access higher education. As previously noted, around one-third of SCU students are enrolled in external studies. As new technologies develop and students seek more flexibility in their learning environments, external modes of delivery will continue to be a sought-after education alternative. Increasingly, SCU (and others) is moving to a more flexible, or 'converged delivery' model, whereby multiple modes of delivery are converged into a single, flexible mode of delivery for students, irrespective of a student's location. SCU has a 3-year Converged Delivery project underway, whereby new approaches to delivering course materials are being explored. These options include real-time interaction at a distance, using web-based media such as Elluminate and Second Life, recording and pre-recording lecturer presentations for replay through iTunesU, material on CD Rom or DVD, web resources, intensive mode delivery etc.

For this new approach to be effective for all students, particularly those living in disadvantaged areas, the roll-out of the Government's Broadband Network needs to prioritise those regions in need and for which the physical location of many services (including higher education) is not practicable.

### **Implications of government measures on students living in regional areas**

While a number of the changes to the student income support system are positive, a potential concern is that a significant number of students will lose their 'independent' status because of the tightening up of the eligibility requirements from 2010 for Youth Allowance and ABSTUDY. Prospective students have no option but to work full-time for 30 hours per week for at least 18 months before being able to qualify as financially independent. This potentially discriminates against those regional students living in locations with only limited full-time work available. SCU will be interested to see what impact this policy change has on enrolments and deferrals, and whether the other changes to the income support measures act as an effective counter-balance to this tightening up of eligibility.

Another potential area of concern is one that arose in a verbal briefing attended by SCU's Deputy Vice-Chancellor. He was advised by officials that rent assistance will only be available to students who have to travel more than 90 minutes from their residence to their place of study. In regional areas, a distance of 90 minutes travel could mean a student who lives up to 150 kilometres away from the campus will not be entitled to rent assistance. The lack of adequate public transport, particularly between regional centres, is an additional barrier to regional students. The entitlement to rent assistance needs to be more flexible to deal with students studying at regional campuses, with the related guidelines to be transparent and fair in the way the assistance is allocated.

### **Impact of government policies on enrolments**

At this stage, it is too soon to assess the impact of the changes in response to the Bradley Review, although Southern Cross University supports the Government's lifting of enrolment caps from 2012. SCU is committed to a growth strategy, particularly given that two of our campuses are located in regions that continue to experience above-average population growth (Coffs Harbour and Tweed Heads/Gold Coast).

The additional commitments to supporting increased participation by equity students are also welcomed. Around 22 percent of SCU students are from a low SES background, which is slightly higher than the Government's target of 20 percent by 2025, and is substantially higher than the national average of 15 percent. SCU has recently undertaken an internal review of our social inclusion and equity programs following the Bradley Review and the Government's response to ensure the University is best able to determine how to support the new approach to social inclusion.

### **The impact on regional communities**

While there are specific cost-pressures on delivering quality higher education (both teaching and research) in regional areas, there are many regional (and outer-metropolitan) areas that continue to experience strong population growth, and changing economic, social and environmental dynamics with its associated skills shortages and changing skill needs.

The physical presence of a campus plays a critical role in facilitating outreach activities to regional schools. For example, SCU's Equity Outreach program works with seven high schools in the Northern Rivers (Richmond River, Casino, Kyogle, Nimbin and Woodenbong) and Coffs Harbour regions (Kempsey and Nambucca Heads). In 2008, around 200 high school students were involved in the program, the majority from year 11, and the program has been expanded this year to include students in years 8-10. Part of the program includes students visiting the SCU campuses for a hands-on experience of university life. Having a university campus in their region they can visit makes it easier for students to participate in the program.

Regional universities also play an important role in helping to retain graduates in regional areas – that is, that those who 'train in the bush, stay in the bush'. For example, the 2008 Graduate Destination Survey results for SCU showed that almost 27 percent of graduates who were in full-time employment were employed in the North Coast region. And the presence of a campus can make a regional town more 'liveable' and therefore make it more attractive for professional and skilled workers to locate themselves there.

The presence of a university campus in a regional town has a major economic impact. Local economies benefit from the salaries paid directly to staff; goods and services are purchased locally; and the students who stay, and those other domestic and international students who come into the region all contribute economically. Studies have pointed to an economic multiplier of between 2.5 and 3.5 for each dollar that the university expends. It is for this reason that local governments with a campus in their region would consider the loss of the campus as high-level in their risk management plans.

Southern Cross University commissioned a study, which reported in January 2006, into the economic impact of its campuses in the three regions in which the main campuses are based: Lismore, Coffs Harbour and Tweed Heads.<sup>1</sup> The Lismore campus was responsible for 10 percent of the total value of output of the Lismore region as a whole, and 9 percent of the total number of jobs. The Coffs Harbour and Tweed campuses had smaller levels of economic impact (around 1 percent), reflecting the smaller sizes of the campuses at that time and the relative larger sizes of the two regional economies. Nevertheless, the study makes the following finding:

*“Each SCU Campus offers their region, educational and career-development opportunities. However, as a result of the economic activity which they generate, they are also a substantial current contributor to each region's value of output and employment across a range of industry sectors.”*

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<sup>1</sup> Fuller, D & Wilde S 2006 *The economic value of Southern Cross University campuses to their regional economies: a campus-based input-output analysis* pp3 -4. <http://www.cedar.net.au/publications.htm>

Government measures that act to better support viable regional universities or regional campuses will have direct economic (and other) benefit to the surrounding regional community.

### **Conclusion**

In concluding, I wish to reiterate the importance for students of ensuring that regional universities remain a genuine educational alternative for prospective higher education students. Regional universities have a particular role to play in supporting the diversity of Australia's higher education sector. They provide access, and regional capacity-building and engagement which enables Australia's higher education sector, as a whole, to offer high quality and diverse programs across the country and to a wider range of potential students.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this Inquiry and I look forward to the Committee's Report.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Clark".

Paul Clark