



**The University of Newcastle**

**Submission**

**to the**

**Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Committee  
Inquiry into Rural and Regional Access to Secondary and Tertiary  
Education Opportunities**

**August 2009**

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

## **Terms of reference**

An assessment of the adequacy of Government measures to provide equitable access to secondary and post-secondary education opportunities to students from rural and regional communities attending metropolitan institutions, and metropolitan students attending regional universities or technical and further education (TAFE) colleges, with particular reference to:

- a.* the financial impact on rural and regional students who are attending metropolitan secondary schools, universities or TAFE;
- b.* the education alternatives for rural and regional students wanting to study in regional areas;
- c.* the implications of current and proposed government measures on prospective students living in rural and regional areas;
- d.* the short- and long-term impact of current and proposed government policies on regional university and TAFE college enrolments;
- e.* the adequacy of government measures to provide for students who are required to leave home for secondary or post-secondary study;
- f.* the educational needs of rural and regional students;
- g.* the impact of government measures and proposals on rural and regional communities; and
- h.* other related matters.

## Background

The University of Newcastle is a multi-campus, progressive and dynamic institution recognised for research achievement, teaching innovation and access to higher education for disadvantaged groups. There is a growing demand to study at the University with a record enrolment in 2008 of 30,340 students.

Newcastle is a university of choice for students from regional NSW. The main Callaghan campus offers a wide range of courses and programs across disciplines in Business and Law, Education and Arts, Engineering and Built Environment, Health, and Science and Information Technology.

The University has a major presence on the Central Coast of New South Wales at Ourimbah through a multi-sector co-located partnership of the University and TAFE NSW - Hunter Institute. The Ourimbah campus offers University, TAFE and Community College programs and courses on one site so that students can take advantage of pathways between levels and sectors of education and training. Affiliates are the Central Coast Community College and the Central Coast Conservatorium of Music.

The Port Macquarie campus of TAFE NSW - North Coast Institute is also a multi-sector campus, offering both University and TAFE programs to students in the mid north coast region of New South Wales.

At its new location in the Sydney Central Business District, the University offers Masters degrees in the high-demand and established areas of Business and Professional Accounting.

### The importance of regional higher education opportunities

Regional universities have a crucial role to play in providing pathways to higher education for students who would otherwise not consider this option. Through its multi-campus operations, the University of Newcastle is able to provide a wide-range of options for regional and rural students. The University has a strong commitment to access by students from regional and remote areas and has been a leader in providing innovative pathways, particularly for students from a low SES background and Indigenous students. With increased resources, the University would be well placed to do more for these cohorts.

The Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) 2008 audit commended the University in these areas, which are critical for regional and rural students:

- the implementation, enhancement and success of the Newstep and the Open Foundation programs in providing pathways to higher education;
- the support given to Indigenous students by Wollotuka including its activities on the Ourimbah Campus, as well as on the number of successful completions of Indigenous students;
- its proactive liaison with local secondary schools and TAFE colleges and the ensuing enhancement of educational opportunities for students in their local region.

Table 1 shows that access and participation rates for students from low SES backgrounds at the University of Newcastle are nearly twice NSW and Australian averages; they are the highest in Australia. This is a reflection of the University's demographic base and our enabling programs, as well as high school liaison and other activities to attract and support students from low SES backgrounds.

**Table 1 Access and participation by students from low SES, 2006**

	UoN	NSW	Australia
Access Rate (% commencing domestic students)	29.62	13.94	15.44
Participation Rate (% all domestic students)	27.88	13.09	14.72

Source: Institutional Assessment Framework, 2007

The University's Submission to the Review of Australian Higher Education highlights issues of low socio-economic status participation; Indigenous participation; student support considerations; the contribution of the University to the regional economy; and funding and resource issues. As these matters are relevant to the current Inquiry, the Submission is included at Attachment 1.

## **Cross-sectoral collaboration**

The University is committed to being a University of access. This commitment includes collaboration with other education providers so that students have multiple pathways to higher education. Successful collaboration to provide these opportunities is essential in regional areas, where students are less likely to have tertiary educated parents, or to consider higher education as an option.

Key areas of cross-sectoral collaboration for the University of Newcastle have been at the Central Coast Campus, the Port Macquarie Campus and through the Joint Medical Program.

### **Central Coast Campus (Ourimbah)**

The CCC was established in 1989. The initial driver for the campus was the need to provide a tertiary education precinct on the Central Coast to improve opportunities for education and training for all age groups. Thus, the original vision was to develop a joint educational profile that extends opportunities to the region and maximises pathways between the sectors. To this end, a co-located campus was designed to maximise educational benefits. This strategy was extended by including the Wyong and Gosford campuses of the TAFE NSW – Hunter Institute into a 'Central Coast Campuses' model.

### **Articulation arrangements**

One early outcome from the multi-sector arrangement was the development of a series of qualification pathway employment maps. Curriculum pathways were created to assist students and local careers advisors in understanding the study options available at Ourimbah and how these could be developed from school through TAFE and into higher education. Maps for 40 employment areas were identified, placed on the web and updated, following University degree reviews and changes to national training packages; most recently in 2007 under the guidance of the joint credit committee. TAFE students can currently articulate into 9 University of Newcastle degree programs at Ourimbah (and 28 for all UoN campuses).

Familiar issues for cross-sectoral partners include the requirement for an ongoing commitment by all partners at cross-sectoral sites; recognition of each other's mission and reasons for being in the partnership; and the need to continually update pathways. Establishing curriculum articulation and 'pathways' is one of the most challenging parts of any cross-sectoral partnership, as there is territorial and financial advantage to be negotiated and potentially ceded, even if to an agreed greater (common) good.

### **Stimulating greater participation**

The campus has been successful in stimulating greater participation in education and training, with 10 of the top feeder schools for the University located on the Central Coast, and the Gosford postcode (2250) providing the highest number of applicants for studying on campus. The campus has been awarded more than 470 growth places since 2005 and was able to fill these places and respond quickly to the resource demands made by such rapid expansion.

In a Commonwealth Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs report in 2000, the campus was cited as one of the best justified, longest established and most successful multi-partner campuses in Australia. In 2005, the campus was listed as an example of 'good practice' in a NSW DET publication on *Co-operation Between Schools, TAFE and Universities* (p.3).

Government policy for education and training in cross-sectoral sites presents the following challenges:

- involvement of state and federal organisations: changes in courses (HSC curriculum, training packages, university courses) are not synchronised
- funding is provided to individual partners for their own priorities and to meet targets. This funding model can stymie the creation of pathways between the sectors.
- regional campuses and VET experience vacillating levels of policy support
- in spite of the strong contribution regional higher education institutions play in local development, regional, state and national planning are not centred on education and training.

The University's experience through the CCC illustrates that other difficult issues to resolve are student expectations about credit arrangements, ease of movement between partners and sectors, and reducing the costs involved in cross-sectoral arrangements.

## **Port Macquarie Campus**

The Port Macquarie campus currently offers a Bachelor of Nursing and a Bachelor of Teaching/Bachelor of Arts. The limited offerings at smaller campuses reflect the difficulties in achieving economies of scale in regional areas, particularly at smaller universities and campuses. It is well recognised that providing professional educational opportunities such as these close to students' place of residence, provides an incentive to stay in the area. This has important implications for the availability of skilled workers in regional areas.

## **The Joint Medical Program**

The University of Newcastle and the University of New England have forged a unique partnership with Hunter New England Health and Northern Sydney Central Coast Health to develop the innovative Joint Medical Program (JMP).

The JMP capitalises on the University of Newcastle's highly respected medical program and the University of New England's strong rural standing and expertise of delivering programs in nursing, health and science. The program aims to produce medical graduates who are sought for their innovative thinking and are prepared for practice in rural, regional and metropolitan Australia.

The program provides a strong base for postgraduate training and research in urban, regional, rural and remote medicine.

The JMP has a total of 170 Commonwealth Supported Places with 110 places at the University of Newcastle and 60 at the University of New England. Importantly, it is anticipated students are more likely to practice where they train, leading to an increase in the medical workforce and improvement of health services in rural and regional areas.

As these examples show, the University has a demonstrated commitment to collaborative arrangements which benefit the provision of higher education in regional areas. Such arrangements can place higher educational opportunities in local communities which enhances the prospect of increased participation rates. This will be crucial if the Federal Government is to achieve its goal of 40 percent of 25-35 year olds with a bachelor level qualification. With further funding to the University and its partners, the University of Newcastle would be well placed to build on the programs already in place.

## **Participation rates and demand**

Education is a key driver for building the skills and knowledge base of regional and rural communities and provision of a broad spectrum of higher educational opportunities in regional areas is essential.

Prospective students demand a wide range of educational opportunities close to home. Data from the University's 2008 undergraduate commencing students survey showed that in the mean of student responses regarding importance (1 not very important; 2 important; 3 very important) across the Newcastle, Central Coast and Port Macquarie campuses, the offering of a degree program that matched student's interests had the highest mean rank at 2.77. Proximity to home was also an issue (2.38) considered important by students.

Data from the University Admissions Centre shows that for 2009 entry, the University of Newcastle had the highest number of first preferences of any University outside Sydney and is ranked fifth in the State. The University experienced an increase of almost 10 percent in first (9.9%) and total (9.4%) UAC undergraduate preferences in Commonwealth Supported Places between 2008 and 2009. The preferences data further shows that 75% of demand for places at the University is from 7 regions: Newcastle, Central Coast, Lake Macquarie, Lower Hunter, Mid North Coast, Port Stephens and Sydney North.

Availability of local educational opportunities is even more critical on the University's smaller campuses. For example, in 2006, 80% of commencing students cited proximity to home as the reason for choosing to study at the University's CCC and nearly 1,500 Central Coast residents commenced study at the Newcastle campus of the University the same year (Campus Direction Statement, Discussion Paper, August 2008).

The University has a long history of attracting a significant number of students from other regional areas in NSW. It is highly probable that such students prefer a regional University which provides an environment more like their home environment than a metropolitan university.

The ageing of the workforce and increased participation rates in higher education across all age cohorts underpin the need for regional universities to be able to offer a wide range of programs. In 2008, approximately 57% of the University's undergraduate commencing student enrolments were under 21, 23% were between 21 and 26 and the remaining 20% were over 26. Due to family and financial responsibilities, older students are far less likely to be able to move than younger students and more likely therefore to demand local higher education opportunities. While on-line education offers potential to address this issue, the range of offerings possible through this mode of delivery will necessarily be limited to those which do not require significant infrastructure.

Postgraduate coursework and professional programs are particularly relevant for older students. As identified in the University's Strategic Plan, there is an acknowledgement that the institution's teaching strengths are focused in the professions and one of the strategic priorities for the University is the education of professionals. The provision of such programs in regional areas is critical for building the local skills and knowledge base.

Smaller regional universities and campuses can suffer from issues of economies of scale which affects the programs which can be offered. If regional universities are unable to offer a wide variety of courses, then students will necessarily have to move or not undertake tertiary study.

The implications of student-based rather than institutional funding to start from 2012 are likely to have significant impacts on regional universities in terms of their ability to continue to offer a full range of courses. Strong funding for regional universities to be able to continue to offer a broad range of educational opportunities is required.

### **Access and pathways to higher education for rural and regional students**

In 2009 46% of undergraduate commencing students were school leavers and 54% were students who arrived at tertiary study via a range of admission pathways.

The University has introduced a number of measures specifically designed to facilitate entry of rural and regional students, notably the Rural and Regional Preference Scheme (under which students from high schools within a designated area are allocated an additional four points to their admissions rank) and the Rural/Remote Admissions Scheme (under which 30% of available Commonwealth Supported Places (CSP) in the Bachelor of Medicine - JMP are allocated to students who are classified as rural or non-rural based on the Federal Government's Rural, Remote and Metropolitan Areas (RRMA) Classification)

Since 2007, the University has also operated a TAFE guaranteed entry scheme to Commonwealth supported places. In 2007 19% of commencing students at the University were admitted on the basis of TAFE qualifications.

### **Enabling programs**

As part of its commitment to being a university of access, the University has focussed resources to expand its enabling programs. In 2007 the University produced 21% of Australia's graduates from Commonwealth funded Enabling Studies Programs, most of whom go on to further tertiary study. The majority of successful students enrol in undergraduate programs at the University of Newcastle but are also eligible for acceptance at other tertiary institutions across NSW and Australia.

Through its enabling programs the University offers students high quality preparatory programs to enable them to access University study with a high expectation of success arising from good preparation in content, skills and habits of study. The programs deliver an induction to University culture and frequently provide students with their first experience of success.

The domestic enabling programs have been specifically designed to support students who can be defined by the DEEWR equity categories. In particular, low SES and NESB students have an opportunity to enter undergraduate study because of the support provided by the University's programs. The University also supports the development of Indigenous pathways and the development of intervention strategies leading towards the success of Indigenous students in enabling and undergraduate programs.

The total number of domestic enabling students admitted each year is around 2000, reaching nearly 2400 in 2009. The University offers one year preparatory programs for the following cohorts of domestic students:

- Yapug for indigenous students – Callaghan campus
- Open Foundation for mature age students – Ourimbah and Callaghan and by Distance education
- Newstep for recent school leavers – Ourimbah and Callaghan campus

Open Foundation has produced a number of University medal winners. Based on the success of this program, a new initiative is Open Foundation by Distance which allows students the opportunity to study at home and prepare for entry to university without attending classes on campus. In 2009 approximately 200 students commenced studying by this mode. The Distance program is targeted to rural and regional Northern NSW and particularly the Hastings region, but is available to domestic students from all parts of Australia.

The University's domestic enabling programs are seen by the Hunter and Central Coast region - and the broader community - as a means by which their educational aspirations can be achieved. The fee-free status of the programs has been crucial to the ability of the University to provide this broad access to tertiary education. To maintain the domestic programs as pathways to University entry for low SES and other equity groups it is important that Federal Government financial support for the programs be extended. With increased funding, the University would be well placed to further build on these initiatives.

### **Outreach**

The University has also invested in outreach programs to schools and welcomes government moves to provide funding for such programs. The University has been a leader in developing such programs, including:

- the special program for gifted high school students, which allows such students to take a selected University course whilst at high school;
- HSC Study Days in Newcastle and the Central Coast to assist Year 12 students with their HSC studies;
- A residential summer school, the Year 9 Girls + Maths + Science = Choices Summer School . This initiative targets female year 9 indigenous and non-indigenous students from equity target groups such as students from regional and rural areas, low socio-economic status and non-English speaking backgrounds and/ or students with a disability. A period of on-campus study is highly beneficial for rural and regional students. This is especially true for high achieving students from these areas who rarely have the opportunity to benchmark themselves against other high achieving students or to meet positive role models.
- The Making Educational Goals Sustainable (MEGS) initiative, a partnership between the NSW Department of Education and Training and the University, which is aimed at Year 6 students and their parents to promote education amongst students from targeted equity groups;
- UniLink which helps to address the Hunter region's growing youth unemployment problem by encouraging more local school students to complete Year 12 and then consider further education.
- the Science and Engineering Challenge, designed to encourage students to study science at the HSC level. This is now an Australia-wide program.
- the SMART (Science, Maths, And Real Technology) program which in August conducted science shows in nine remote Arnhem Land communities. The program provides resources for teachers, including a workshop discussing ideas about science and technology in the classroom. SMART reaches around 20,000 people across Australia each year. It is a partnership between the University of Newcastle's Faculty of Science and Information Technology, the Australian Government Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research, Engineers Australia and the Arnhem Land Progress Association.

Such initiatives have proven to be invaluable in assisting students, particularly those from regional and rural areas, to build aspiration, to realise their potential for higher education and to understand the opportunities provided by tertiary study.

## **Indigenous participation**

The University is a national leader in Indigenous education and collaboration. The high Indigenous student participation rate, retention rate and proportion of Indigenous academic and general staff at the University are testament to our commitment in this area.

Indigenous student numbers have increased by 40% since 2004 to now total more than 500 students. Through our outreach activities the enrolments in Yapug have been growing, with an annual average increase of 24% of Indigenous foundation studies students over the period 2005-2008.

In early 2009 the University established the Wollotuka Institute to consolidate all Indigenous activities of the University into one strategic and operational body. This structure better serves our commitment to Indigenous collaboration and incorporates research activities, teaching and learning initiatives, staff development and student support.

The Institute will provide enhanced support to our Indigenous Health students through increased access to resources for students, health professionals, and Indigenous communities. This is a significant step in helping to realise the Federal Government's commitment to 'Closing the Gap' between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia. Our Elder in Residence Program is a key to this approach and brings an important element of pastoral care and cultural continuity to our support for Indigenous peoples.

Given its leadership in access for low SES groups and in successful cross-sectoral collaboration and outreach, the University welcomes increased government funding to support these initiatives. Further innovative initiatives in enabling programs would be possible with dedicated funding, and a focus on this area is likely to be crucial to the Federal Government's goal of 40 percent of 25-35 year olds with a bachelor level qualification and low SES participation rates of 20 percent.

## **Scholarships**

The University has a long-standing commitment to access and equity. The Equity Scholarship Scheme of the University of Newcastle (ESSUN) was introduced in 2005 to assist financially and educationally disadvantaged students take up and continue in study at the University. The ESSUN guidelines have been closely aligned with Commonwealth Scholarship program, and since the introduction of ESSUN there has been considerable growth in the number of students requiring assistance; 30% of students are classified as from low socio economic backgrounds.

New CS guidelines proposed for introduction from 2010 will mean that any new CS offered will only be available to students who are Austudy, ABSTUDY or Youth Allowance recipients. Students in receipt of Disability Support Pension, Parenting Payment or Carer Payment, who were previously prioritised for CS entitlement, will not be catered for from 2010. This proposal has the potential to seriously disadvantage rural and regional students who are in these equity categories.

Whilst the numbers of the new CS will rise, the financial benefit and target groups being assisted will decline, leaving large numbers of disadvantaged students ineligible for CS assistance.

DEEWR has indicated that it is anticipated that Institution Equity Scholarships (IES), such as ESSUN, would assist students who are currently eligible for CS but under new guidelines would be ineligible.

Statistics for offers of CS show that in 2009 approx 32% of offers at the University of Newcastle were to students who would in 2010 be ineligible for new CS initiative funding. The proposed changes will place a strong emphasis on the availability of ESSUN if this group of students is to be assisted.

The University therefore estimates that changes to CS will require significant increases in its expenditure on ESSUN funding to provide assistance for students with demonstrated financial and educational disadvantage, no longer catered for within the CS program. Students in receipt of Disability Support Pension, Parenting Payment or Carer Payment were prioritised in the previous CS program. As the new CS scholarships will not be available to these groups, universities will be under further financial pressure to maintain equity access for these groups.

There are also administrative implications for universities in terms of the need to re-design institutional scholarship schemes so that they align with the new income support arrangements. Early advice on guidelines and scholarship administration will allow universities to make the necessary changes and provide clarity to prospective students.



The impact on Student Support and Welfare initiatives is difficult to quantify, but there is a concern that the changes will substantially add to those students requiring access to support services and student loan and grant facilities.

The new Workforce Participation Criteria which are based on hours worked rather than dollars earned may also disadvantage students from rural communities where access to employment opportunities is limited.

## **Retention and progression**

While availability of higher education opportunities is essential in regional areas, issues of retention and progression are also important.

With funding from the Higher Education Equity Support Program (HEESP) the University undertook a survey of students leaving the University during 2008 within their first year of study to explore the reasons for withdrawal. Out of twenty statements attempting to measure the influence of university-based and personal factors on the decision to withdraw from university, only one indicated a statistically significant difference between low SES and other students, with those from the low SES group more likely to strongly agree that they just couldn't afford to be at university.

Literature suggests that many first year students find starting university studies a difficult transition period, in which they are at risk emotionally and psychologically; this is especially so for students from rural and isolated areas. Much of the research suggests that social factors play a large role.

The University has identified a need for increased support for students from isolated areas and has implemented a number of strategies including a student mentor scheme, enhanced orientation sessions, expanded skills development opportunities, and financial support. (University of Newcastle, Equity Report to DEST, 2007)

Affordable accommodation for students is also a significant problem for all universities and students at present. Accommodation shortages are keenly felt by students who are required to leave home for secondary or post-secondary study. On-campus accommodation options are in high demand by regional and rural students. This type of accommodation provides networks and support which have proven to be extremely important for retention of relocating students. Capital support to provide on-campus housing for rural and regional students would be welcome.

## **Conclusion**

The University has an excellent track record in *cross-sectoral collaboration*. Structural and financial issues can however impede the creation of seamless pathways between the sectors. Fruitful cross-sectoral collaboration to increase pathways to tertiary education requires effective funding for universities and their partners to reduce the costs involved.

Prospective students demand a wide-range of educational opportunities close to home. Strong funding for regional universities to be able to continue to offer *a broad range of educational opportunities* is required.

*Enabling programs* provide a crucial mechanism to access higher education for rural, remote and regional students, particularly those from a low SES background. Enabling programs by distance, such as the University's Open Foundation by Distance initiative, can provide opportunities for RRR students to complete enabling programs in their own area, and then complete university education on-site without having to relocate for the entire period of study. The area of enabling programs requires strong government support and financial commitment to assist students into degree programs. Further innovative initiatives in enabling programs would be possible with dedicated funding.

Mechanisms to co-ordinate linkages into schools and *targeted outreach* would also be appropriate, as this is an important avenue by which student aspirations can be built, particularly those in rural, regional and remote areas.

Some of the proposed changes to *scholarship arrangements* are likely to disadvantage rural and regional students, particularly those in certain equity categories. Universities will be under further financial pressure to maintain equity access for these groups.

Higher education outcomes are influenced by levels of *student retention and progression*. It is critical for universities to have the means to support students during the initial period of study, with mentoring and peer support for rural and remote students being particularly useful in this regard.

Many universities are recognising the importance of having *on-site accommodation* for students to live and study in a supported environment. This is particularly important for students in the early stages of university life, and especially so for those who relocate to attend university. The support provided through on-site accommodation assists in adjustment to university life and therefore in retention of these students. Capital support to provide on-campus housing for rural and regional students would be welcome.