

TOTAL COLLEGE ADVISORY COUNCIL
PO Box 146 Raymond Terrace 2324 NSW

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

Dear Sir/Madam

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

This submission is prepared on behalf of Tocal College Advisory Council. The Council is made up of representatives of the rural industry and rural community to provide advice to Tocal College on its operation and delivery of services. The College is a Registered Training Organisation based in NSW with two Campuses, CB Alexander Campus at Tocal, Paterson in the Hunter Valley and Murrumbidgee Rural Studies Campus at Yanco, in the Riverina. Staff are also located at Armidale, Tamworth, Gosford, Camden, Wagga and Dubbo. The College is part of NSW Department of Industry and Investment (formerly NSW Department of Primary Industries). The Council is particularly interested in the delivery of education and training for people who wish to pursue a career in rural industry. This submission will be based around the Terms of Reference.

a. Financial Impact

The cost of travel for country people to study in metropolitan areas and vice versa is a significant factor when decisions are made with respect to educational alternatives and opportunities. Council is aware that apprentices and trainees are provided with travel support to undertake training but this is not available to students studying full time vocational courses which are not linked to the apprentice or trainee system. It is the Council's understanding that NSW travel assistance for trainees and apprentices amounts to 14 cents per kilometre (private or public transport) and \$25 or \$28 per night for accommodation. Trainees and apprentices have to travel further than 120 kilometres per round trip to qualify. There is no reason why there should not be some support for full time students in DET to travel to their place of study. Obviously their accommodation would be covered by normal Austudy arrangements.

Council believes there should be financial support for individuals who are disadvantaged by isolation. Disadvantage by isolation should be a strong element of the government's social inclusion agenda.

The average income of families in rural and regional areas is lower than those in metropolitan areas and there is an additional disadvantage presented by distance.

b. Educational Alternatives

The educational alternatives for rural and regional students wanting to study in regional areas are often limited because of the lack of a critical mass of students to undertake study. The economics of running educational institutions dictates certain class sizes and there are few opportunities for regional institutions to vary these class sizes to fit in with the thin markets that often exist in rural and regional areas.

Tocal College's training in practical skills is an important contribution to the education of people in rural and regional areas. This is only possible because of the accommodation that is available at the College allowing for an accumulation of students interested in practical training to form large enough classes and groups to make courses viable.

The key to the success of Tocal and other like colleges has been their ability to accommodate students. Financial support from government for capital works to refurbish and maintain this accommodation stock is important.

c. Implications of Current Policies

It is the Council's understanding that there are few incentives or mechanisms to encourage young people and their families to travel to study in a metropolitan area. In addition there are fewer incentives for young people to travel and study in a rural and regional area.

Total College's full time courses attract over on third of its students from metropolitan areas, a third from the peri-urban areas and a third from rural and regional areas. With the advantage of having accommodation available, a significant number of young people move from metropolitan areas for a career in the country. Few Total ex students end up living in the city unless they pursue a non-agricultural career.

It is Council's understanding that recent changes to student support systems make it more difficult for young people to meet the criteria of Austudy through a Gap Year. It is more difficult for young people to find work in a country area than the city and wages are often lower, making it even more difficult for the Gap Year criteria to be met. Council believes that any mechanism to have students at an older age when they undertake tertiary study is better for the educational process. The Gap Year concept should be supported through institutional mechanisms by government.

d. Short and Long Term Impact of Government Policies

Current government policies, both State and Federal, work against a diversity of education and training opportunities in rural and regional areas. The thin markets and large distances for courses in agriculture and related industries make it very difficult for a wide diversity of programs to be available because of the inadequacy of government support measures. There seems to be very little recognition of the cost imposed on families of students who by necessity wish to study away from home. A report published by the NCVET in 2008 titled "A Well Skilled Future" sums up another issue regarding government policy: "Currently there is no funding for innovative or anticipatory programs, nor are current funding allocations in tune with regional requirements. There is a need for more discretionary funding to allow for some creativeness. The catch cry is, 'It is too expensive to be innovative'."

The NCVET clearly points out the fact that there is no room for innovation and adaption of systems to change within current funding guidelines. There needs to be contestable and discretionary funds available from the Australian Government to seek better ways of delivering VET training to service rural and regional areas.

f. Education Needs of Rural and Regional Students

The thin markets and large distances make it difficult for a diverse range of educational opportunities to be provided for rural and regional students. It should be noted that the delivery of educational programs through e-learning is not a panacea for this problem.

Total College presents a wide range of hands-on practical courses that are not suitable for e-learning. They also contain a large OH&S component, which again can only be effectively taught through face-to-face practical experience.

A significant skills shortage continues to exist in rural areas. The AgriFood Skills Australia in its 2009 Environmental Scan of the agrifood industries indicates that there is a shortfall of at least 60,000 people in the agricultural industries. It should be noted that these figures are difficult to compute and accurately record, but there is no doubt that the industry faces a significant skills shortage.

It is important not to overlook the needs of Indigenous people in communities in rural and regional areas. Indigenous people are probably more likely to remain in rural and regional areas on their country because of their attachment to place. Indigenous people have made a significant contribution to rural industry in the past, however efforts to provide stable, reliable and ongoing training have been ineffective except in particular locations. Total College has been training Indigenous people through its Agricultural Aboriginal Training Program for 20 years and unfortunately this program has suffered stop/go funding which does not encourage participants to gain full or higher qualifications. This type of funding provides for short term skills training rather than training for a career and enhancing commitment to working in a particular industry.

Pastoral care for students living away from home (be it metropolitan or rural and regional) is an area not addressed by current government policies. Educational needs should include addressing pastoral care matters if drop-out rates are to be controlled. Total College, through its residential programs, has a low drop-out rate due to the impact of pastoral care policies.

There is an ongoing need for residential agricultural education and this has never been addressed as a sub set of vocational education in general. A recent New Zealand study demonstrated the efficacy of residential agricultural education. It also presented a number of models of residential agricultural education which are working in the context of New Zealand agriculture. At present there is a tendency for vocational education to work on a *one size fits all* basis, where in fact this is not appropriate.

g. Impact of Government Measures and Proposals

Council is unaware of all the proposals which government has to remedy this situation. It will, however, need to take affirmative action in terms of funding for people who live in rural and regional areas to undertake study.

There also a need to promote careers in rural and regional areas to young people regardless of where they may grow up. Currently there are few incentives to support training in rural areas; it is very city-centric.

Young people who grow up or are trained in regional areas are more likely to continue living in those areas and pursuing a career. Agriculture faces major skills shortages and this can only be remedied through training opportunities. Current government measures based around lowest cost per student do not address the fundamental problems faced by the disadvantage of living in a rural or regional area.

The current policy of delivering all educational funding through state agencies is not effective. It does not work where there is a need to have students attend courses from interstate. The state-centric model is now no longer an effective way to provide cohesive and equitable vocational education for regional and rural Australia.

Future programs should be funded nationally, based around a national set of guidelines so that there are no longer inequities between states.

Current government policies involving student support through Austudy and Centrelink seem to have a number of problems. Some Council members have related anecdotal horror stories associated with students and Centrelink payments. It is not within the scope of this submission to provide all the details of such situations, but members believe it is important to flag the issue. Current student support mechanisms—especially if students also earn some money—can result in difficulties with Centrelink, particularly through the interpretation of rules. At present there is nowhere where students can seek advice on how the rules may affect them until they actually apply and commit themselves to a certain path within the system. This seems to lead to frustration and potential inequity.

The Australian Government should consider a range of pilot programs to trial differential funding models for the delivery of vocational training to specialised groups within rural and regional areas. For example, at present there is no traineeship for young people to study apiculture (beekeeping) because of the thin markets and the lack of a critical mass of trainees in any particular area or state. There is no incentive for an RTO to promote such a course, because the likelihood of getting a reasonable number of students to a class is remote. Therefore, a national pilot program for an apiculture traineeship is the only option to ensure we have well-trained people for the beekeeping industry in the future. The availability of discount airfares make interstate travel a possibility and travelling interstate is probably cheaper than travelling within states by air.

The recently established Primary Industries Education Foundation (PIEF) aims to encourage learning about Australia's primary industries in schools. It is suggested that the inquiry examine how PIEF can assist in addressing the needs of access to rural and regional secondary education and careers in primary industries. The PIEF is a tripartite organisation between government, industry and the education sector. Further details of PIEF can be provided from Tocal College.

Conclusion

The matters addressed in this inquiry are important for both the economic and social futures of rural and regional Australia. The Council values the opportunity to have an input into the inquiry and it would be happy to assist with further information if required.

Yours sincerely

Margo Duncan
Chair, Tocal College Advisory Council

4 August 2009