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Senator Glenn Sterle  
Chair  
Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Committee  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600  
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Dear Senator Sterle

### **Submission to Inquiry into Rural and Regional Access to Educational Opportunities**

Universities Australia is the industry peak body representing the university sector. Universities Australia represents Australia's thirty nine universities in the public interest, both nationally and internationally. We are pleased to make the following submission to the Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Committee Inquiry into Rural and Regional Access to Secondary and Tertiary Education Opportunities.

#### ***Educational opportunities for regional students***

Australia's university system embraces the belief that all Australians of ability should have access to their choice of university, whether that university is located in a regional or metropolitan area. A key element of this choice is promoting the availability of high quality university education within rural and regional areas. Australia's renowned regional universities allow students to stay in, or move to, regional areas to study, and in doing so help develop a skilled professional regional labour force. Such students usually work while studying, may undertake work-integrated learning and on graduating often remain in regional areas. Some regional universities have been in existence for half a century or more, attract many students from metropolitan areas and overseas and have deserved international reputations for innovative approaches to teaching and research. A well known example is the University of New England's pioneering of distance education from the 1970s, while contemporary examples include James Cook Universities' research concentration in tropical health and science and Charles Darwin University's expertise in Indigenous issues.

A list of regionally-based universities, and other universities with regional campuses, is at Attachment A.

Another vital element of promoting choice for regional students is ensuring that adequate support is available for those students who need to move considerable distances from their current home to attend their preferred course and university. Both regional and metropolitan universities have invested heavily in on and off-campus accommodation, employment services, academic support, orientation guides and other means to smooth the way for incoming students – particularly those students, such as those from remote

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areas, for whom the university environment may initially be challenging. More could undoubtedly be done in this area, and universities are working with government to examine innovative options that could address some of these issues. These could include an Education Investment Fund equivalent or supplementation for accommodation projects, or consideration of public-private partnerships with business and universities during current financing difficulties.

For those students who, for whatever reason, are unable to live close to a university campus, most Australian universities also offer a range of distance learning, online and multimode study options. This means that many popular degrees are able to be undertaken in whole or in part from wherever the student resides. For many regional universities, distance learning courses are an important part of their business model – as well as supporting rural students, they are widely taken up by students living in metropolitan areas who are attracted to their flexibility and innovative content. Distance learning will not be ideal for every student and every course, but it greatly increases the available higher education options. Open Universities Australia comprising seven universities formalises one group of offerings of this kind.<sup>1</sup>

Current work to strengthen linkages between universities and vocational education and training (VET) providers also has the potential to benefit many regional students, for example by allowing them to commence study at a local VET institution but with options to articulate this into later university study in a co-located university and/or an institution in a larger centre. This is being done by individual institutions plus at a system level with reinforcing policy settings. Universities Australia itself is directly working with bodies such as TAFE Directors Australia and the Australian Council for Private Education and Training to help tertiary education providers make constructive contributions to this agenda.

### ***Current student numbers and graduate outcomes***

Student data from the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) shows that in 2007 there were 140,000 students enrolled in Australian universities who came from a regional area. This represents eighteen per cent of domestic university students, which is significantly below a population parity level of twenty five per cent. This number has remained relatively constant in recent years, although the number of students within this overall figure who come from remote areas (under the Australian Bureau of Statistics definition) has fallen from 12,000 in 2002 to 8,000 in 2007. Overall, only 1.1 per cent of people from remote areas participated in higher education in 2007, compared to a population parity level of 2.5 per cent. Many factors may have contributed to the low number of students from remote areas, including the increasing cost of relocating to study and the shortage of university-educated role models. Locational disadvantage can in turn be linked to other forms of disadvantage, as Indigenous Australians and people of low socioeconomic status are overrepresented in regional, rural and remote areas.

Access and equity for regional students was highlighted as a concern in the extensive research conducted for Universities Australia by the Centre for Higher Education Research at the University of Melbourne.<sup>2</sup> This report recommended improved measurement, research and funding pertaining to access and equity issues in Australian universities, including greater support for home study and improved access for Indigenous students. Quality educational options within regions are also an important element of improving access – educational attainment is higher in those centres that do benefit from a campus and regional universities often already exceed the government's target of twenty per cent of enrolments coming from lower socioeconomic status students.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.open.edu.au>

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/documents/publications/policy/equity/0308\\_Particip\\_Equity\\_CSHE\\_Final\\_Report.pdf](http://www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/documents/publications/policy/equity/0308_Particip_Equity_CSHE_Final_Report.pdf)

Using the current MCEETYA definition for students studying in regional areas,<sup>3</sup> in 2007 there were 68,000 full-time equivalent places at campuses in regional locations which includes distance education students and several thousand students from metropolitan areas that had moved to regional campuses to study. However, this is a significant understatement, as it excludes a number of major institutions (such as the University of Newcastle and James Cook University) that would generally be considered to be regional universities in popular usage of the term. Contrary to what is sometimes supposed, many regional campuses offer degrees across a broad range of the natural and health sciences, social sciences, humanities and creative arts. The main difference in disciplines studied is that regional campuses are over-represented in agriculture, environmental sciences and education, and somewhat under-represented in engineering and architecture. While the overall breadth of regional offerings is reassuring, the relative shortage of places in these two key professions does create potential labour force issues that may require creative responses, such as rotation of metropolitan students into regional areas, as already occurs in the medical field through University Departments of Rural Health.

Those persons from regional areas who do attend university have good work prospects after graduation. The recent Graduate Pathways Study, conducted by the Australian Centre for Educational Research for DEEWR, found that, while graduates who came from regional areas initially had slightly more difficulty finding work after graduation than those who had grown up in metropolitan areas, unemployment for both groups had equalised at two per cent by five years after graduation. At the same time, after five years, the study still found a difference of around \$3,500 in average salary between those from regional and metropolitan areas. This is perhaps to be expected, as over half of graduates from regional areas stay in or return to Australia's regions after graduation, where average salaries are generally below those for metropolitan areas (though living costs also may be lower, especially housing).

### ***Enhancing the student experience***

Universities Australia has recently released a position paper on 'Enhancing the student experience and student safety', a copy of which is at Attachment B. Among other initiatives, Australian universities are committing themselves to 'enhance campus-based student support programs in health, child care, counselling, and employment services and expand specific safety programs including through ongoing input from local authorities, such as police commands, road and traffic authorities, real estate institutes and employers'. These measures will benefit all students, but will be of particular value to regional (and international) students moving to a new location to study. Universities are also proposing to seek more regular and reliable data on the student experience, including, where appropriate, independent surveys of student opinion and welfare. The particular experience of students from regional, rural and remote areas could usefully be explored as part of this process.

The task of providing appropriate student services has been made more difficult by the so called 'voluntary student unionism' policy, the effects of which, particularly in regional universities, have been well documented. An estimated \$170 million per annum was removed from the provision of student services by the introduction of this measure. DEEWR's report on *The Impact of Voluntary Student Unionism* noted that 'most submissions concluded that the abolition of upfront compulsory student union fees had impacted negatively on the provision of amenities and services to university students, with the greatest impact at smaller and regional universities and campuses'.<sup>4</sup> Re-introduction of the Student Services and Amenities Bill,

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<sup>3</sup> [http://www.dest.gov.au/archive/highered/eippubs/eip02\\_4/eip\\_03.htm](http://www.dest.gov.au/archive/highered/eippubs/eip02_4/eip_03.htm)

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/higher\\_education/publications\\_resources/profiles/The\\_Impact\\_Voluntary\\_Student\\_Unionism\\_Services\\_Amenities.htm](http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/higher_education/publications_resources/profiles/The_Impact_Voluntary_Student_Unionism_Services_Amenities.htm)

which provides for universities to charge a \$250 student services fee, would immeasurably assist universities to offer a welcoming, safe and supportive environment to all students.

Another dimension of the student experience is how to combine work and study. Australian students have amongst the highest rates of paid work accompanying their studies. Such opportunities are sometimes fewer in regional locations. Universities Australia has recommended a National Internship Scheme that would increase the range of opportunities to provide structured paid work for students that would also be integrated with their studies.<sup>5</sup>

### ***The Bradley review reforms and Youth Allowance***

The 2008 Bradley Review of Australian Higher Education made only limited recommendations in relation to accessibility of education in regional areas. One recommendation was the abolition of the current regional loading, however, in responding to the Bradley Review, Universities Australia argued that the regional loading should be reviewed to ensure it was appropriately targeted rather than abolished. Universities Australia strongly welcomes the Government's decision to adopt this position. In recognition that the increased competition for student places under the Bradley 'student centred funding' model may create challenges for some regional campuses, the Government has set aside \$400 million (replacing the Diversity and Structural Adjustment Fund and drawing \$200 million from the Education Investment Fund) to assist universities to adapt to the new environment. The adequacy of this funding, and the impact of the Bradley reforms on regional campuses more broadly, will need to be monitored closely in the coming years.

As part of its response to the Bradley Review, the Government has proposed a package of reforms to Youth Allowance and other income support payments that will significantly increase the number of people able to access some level of payment, while keeping the overall funding of income support constant. This is being accommodated through a tightening of the eligibility rules for 'independence' with the stated objective of reducing the number of people from well-off families who can access full Youth Allowance. Universities Australia supports reforms to make access to Youth Allowance fairer, but has noted the potential for students from regional areas to be disproportionately affected by the independence criteria change, as these students often make use of the 'gap year' to establish Youth Allowance independence to help defray the substantial cost of moving to a metropolitan or regional centre to study.

There has been some public concern that current 'gap year' students seeking to satisfy the independence criteria may not be able to defer their studies for more than one year should they need to do this in order to meet the revised work requirements. Universities Australia surveyed its 38 members and found that a substantial majority of universities (over 80 per cent) have existing policies that can permit deferred enrolment for up to two years or, occasionally, more. Around half of those universities allowing for deferral beyond one year require consideration on a case by case basis, but these institutions have indicated that they would be favourably disposed towards applicants seeking extensions related to the changed Youth Allowance rules. Universities with current one year only deferrals are also reviewing their policies with a view to enhancing flexibility. Deferral does create planning and provision problems for universities but the benefit to students is fully acknowledged.

In the longer-run what is needed is more substantial as well as better targeted income support arrangements for Australian students. Universities Australia has supported the recent improved targeting of existing support but it remains a fact that Australian university students receive amongst the lowest levels of income support across the OECD countries. At the very least, a review of the feasibility of extending

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/documents/publications/discussion/ A-National-Internship-Scheme.pdf>

income contingent loan provisions for living expenses as well as course fees is required, as is an increase in grant funding for this purpose.

### *Non-educational infrastructure*

Many of the factors that limit the ability of students from regional (and particularly remote) areas of Australia to participate in university study are not directly related to higher education providers themselves. Of particular relevance is inadequate communications infrastructure, which inhibits people from regional and remote areas from taking advantage of online courses and other educational opportunities that could otherwise reduce the impact of geographic isolation. For many regional universities also, shortages of bandwidth limit their ability to provide equivalent educational and research facilities to universities in metropolitan areas. As the Government moves to implement its National Broadband Network, it will be important for educational as well as other reasons that regional, rural and remote areas are not left even further behind. Universities Australia is working with the Australian Academic and Research Network (AARNet) to explore ways in which rural and regional education integration into this outstanding high speed broadband facility can be better enhanced.

Adequate road, rail and air transport infrastructure can also make a major difference to the accessibility of higher education. For example, those with easy rail access to a major city (e.g. people living in the Blue Mountains west of Sydney) may be able to commute to one or more universities, while many others in regional areas face hours of travel on inadequate roads to reach their nearest campus location. Universities Australia would therefore encourage the Committee to consider whether planning of new transport infrastructure at both Commonwealth and State levels should more explicitly take into account the desirability of improving access to university campuses in both regional centres and metropolitan areas. The need to integrate economic and knowledge infrastructure in planning is a new imperative for Australia and should become a dimension of the strategy promoted by Infrastructure Australia.

### *Further information*

Universities Australia would be happy to appear before the Committee to discuss any of the issues raised in this submission. Please contact me on 02 6285 8104 or email [glenn.withers@universitiesaustralia.edu.au](mailto:glenn.withers@universitiesaustralia.edu.au) if you would like any further information or to arrange attendance at any public hearing.

Yours sincerely



Dr Glenn Withers AO  
Chief Executive Officer

## **Appendix A: Australian Regional Universities and Campuses**

### **Part 1: Universities based in regional areas (according to the MCEETYA definition)**

Central Queensland University  
Charles Darwin University  
Charles Sturt University  
James Cook University  
Southern Cross University  
University of Ballarat  
University of New England  
University of Southern Queensland

### **Part 2: Universities based in larger regional centres**

Australian National University  
Deakin University  
James Cook University  
University of Canberra  
University of Newcastle  
University of Notre Dame Australia  
University of Tasmania  
University of Wollongong

### **Part 3: Major capital city universities with regional campuses**

Australian Catholic University  
Curtin University  
Edith Cowan University  
La Trobe University  
Monash University  
Murdoch University  
RMIT University  
University of Adelaide  
University of Melbourne  
University of Queensland  
University of South Australia  
University of Western Australia