

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

Background:

Mildura Development Corporation is the peak economic development organisation for the Mildura region. It operates to develop strategic opportunities for industry creating positive, commercially viable climates for regional business and enterprise to capitalise on. Whilst primarily responsible for economic development in the Mildura Rural City Council LGA the Mildura region also incorporates the Wentworth Shire Council LGA.

The vision for Mildura Development Corporation is “Creating our region’s future.” Post compulsory education and training is a key part of that future.

The Mildura region is known for its quality horticultural and agricultural production and associated food processing industries, as well as being a key tourist destination within Victoria. It is also becoming a focal point for diversification into large scale renewable energy production, being in close proximity to the national electricity grid and having abundant solar resources.

Mildura is located 550kms north west of Melbourne, 400 kms from Adelaide and 1000kms from Sydney. The Mildura region encompasses a tri-state area situated within the heart of the Murray Valley. This region is a large geographic region that is

Education Institutions within the Mildura Region:

Mildura Development Corporation understands the importance of access to and the development of post compulsory education and training in rural and regional areas. The Mildura region has cultivated a strong TAFE sector with both Sunraysia Institute of TAFE and Riverina TAFE providing a range of courses from the traditional industry sectors of horticulture and agriculture, along with engineering, community health, business, hospitality and renewable energy and environmental sustainability. The region also accommodates a number of Registered Training Organisations including Group Training, Adult Education and private providers that provide training in transport and logistics and hair and beauty.

La Trobe University has a campus at Mildura which offers opportunities for rural and regional students across a wide geographic area to obtain tertiary qualifications in one of the following:

- Education
- Business/Commerce
- Arts
- Visual Arts/Graphic Design
- Nursing
- Social Work

La Trobe has also developed an Honours year for Visual Arts students and is pursuing further postgraduate research positions.

Educational Attainment:

Levels of educational attainments within the Mildura region have been demonstrated within the Mildura Social Indicators Report 2008. (Vinson, Aarons, & Glossop, 2008) The Mildura Rural City Council area only has 30.3% of residents over the age of 15 completing Year 12 compared to 34.8% for regional Victoria and 53.8% for Melbourne. (Vinson, Aarons, & Glossop, 2008, p. 33)

Statistics indicate that students from the Mildura region are engaging in apprenticeships and traineeships ahead of their urban counterparts but not engaging in university education in the same numbers, as demonstrated in the table below.

Northern Mallee Local Learning & Employment Network

2007 On Track Information- Year 12 Completers:

Destinations of Yr 12 Completers	NMLLEN Region	Victoria
University Enrolled	39.00%	47.40%
TAFE/VET Enrolled	9.70%	19.00%
Apprenticeships/Traineeships	14.00%	8.10%
Deferrals	18.40%	8.90%

(Northern Mallee Local Learning and Employment Network, 2008, p. 38)

Educational Opportunities for Rural and Regional Students of the Mildura Region:

Whilst there are a number of options for students in the Mildura region, not all courses are offered locally. This requires students, whether young or mature age, to move away from the area to attend university in cities such as Melbourne or Adelaide, or larger regional centres such as Bendigo or Ballarat. Off campus study via distance education can be accessed, however this is not always ideal as there are limited opportunities for student interaction and University support.

Extra financial support for accommodation and living expenses is something that must be factored into any plans for tertiary education that cannot be undertaken locally. Accommodation costs can range from \$8,000 to \$15,000 per annum depending on the urban centre and whether housing is on or off campus. Living away from home expenses are estimated at \$10,000 per annum.

Unfortunately these extra costs for regional students can impede their opportunity to engage in tertiary study unless they obtain financial support through a scholarship or through Commonwealth supported programs, such as Youth Allowance.

One of the key goal areas for Mildura Development Corporation is to ‘assist in building a vibrant and sustainable community.’ As part of this it is important to identify the infrastructure that is required to build community capacity. Access to education and training is a key component of community capacity building.

In catering for the future requirements of a region that is currently diversifying into large scale renewable energy production, it is important to strengthen the post compulsory educational facilities we have in the area so that they are able to extend their existing course offerings, and introduce new course structures thereby enabling local students to access further education.

Constraints on local university course offerings and infrastructure is a major impediment. Addressing these issues would enable a greater uptake by students within the Mildura region who would like to access university but, because of a range of circumstances, including the current drought, do not have the funds to move away from home.

Therefore it is important for Government to consult, consider and analyse the implications of the Bradley Review in light of Recommendations 16-18 to determine the most appropriate funding outcomes and ways in which to deliver tertiary education to regional communities such as Mildura, which has an existing University presence and a highly regarded TAFE presence.

There is a recognition however, that not all courses will be able to be offered within the Mildura region and that there will always be students who will have to access courses at tertiary institutions in other urban centres. It is therefore important that there are accessible funding options for these students so that they can undertake further study. The current policy debate around “gap” years will disadvantage rural and regional students who genuinely have utilised this time to build up funds to ensure they can support themselves when they take up their course option after a 12 month break.

Mildura Development Corporation would advocate for improved and expanded access to university and TAFE courses in rural and regional areas so that students can have increased and localised options for engagement in further education. Where course structures cannot be offered on a local basis, rural and regional students should be able to access additional support to assist them in moving away from home and the costs encountered in that process.

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5th August 2009.