

Ref:VCOfficeUSCSubmSenateInquiryRuralRegionalAccessstoEd070809

7 August 2009

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

Dear Committee Secretary,

**University of the Sunshine Coast Submission
Rural and Regional Access to Secondary and Tertiary Education Opportunities**

The University of the Sunshine Coast has prepared the attached submission for consideration in the matter of rural and regional access to secondary and tertiary education opportunities.

a. The financial impact on rural and regional students who are attending metropolitan schools, universities or TAFE

Studies have shown that increasing education costs have negatively impacted on the aspirations of rural students towards higher education, as has the need to relocate to undertake some programs. The removal or reduction in financial barriers to participation will have a significant impact in widening the participation of prospective students from all equity groups. Enhancing the Commonwealth Scholarships program will provide greater professional opportunities for prospective students wishing to access education and training that is not available locally. As with their peers in regional areas undertaking study, many higher education students in metropolitan institutions undertake paid employment to fully fund or subsidise their living expenses whilst studying. This is particularly true for mature aged students who are increasingly likely to have dependents, and child care expenses incurred to enable their study. Many students are therefore more likely to take longer to complete their programs of study as they balance education contact time with maximising paid employment hours each semester. Currently in Queensland 32% of higher education students study part-time.

b. The education alternatives for rural and regional students wanting to study in regional areas

Current alternative entry pathways which either allow direct entry into programs for students from rural and regional areas, or through completion of a preparatory program, recognise that in addition to OP scores there are indicators such as work experience and demonstrated motivation to succeed which will contribute to an individual's academic potential.

c. The implications of current and proposed government measures on prospective students living in rural and regional areas

Currently in Queensland over 34,000 higher education students are from regional and remote locations, making up 24% of domestic students compared to the national proportion of 19%. Strategies that allow young people in regional areas to study locally make the costs and logistics of higher education more viable for many families. A 1999 DETYA study demonstrated the importance of local facilities, noting a stronger relationship between higher education provision and participation in regional areas than in metropolitan areas. The study concluded that a significant improvement in regional participation is more likely to flow from the expansion of local facilities rather than growth in the higher education system generally. This is demonstrated at USC in the high proportion of enrolments from students living within the region, and the increase in demand with the availability of more professional programs through the University. With recommended changes to measurement of socio-economic status of students in higher education, the 20% low SES target will be more attainable for this region and will more accurately reflect the true regional reality. The single most significant challenge for this University is securing capital monies to accommodate growth and social inclusion.

d. The short and long-term impact of current and proposed government policies on regional university and TAFE enrolments

A tertiary entitlement system could increase the number of admissions to metropolitan universities of prospective students from rural and regional areas, however enrolment patterns historically would not support the likelihood of this. An entitlement system may see more admissions articulating from TAFE into university programs, although the VET sector has not been widely viewed as a feeder to widen participation in university education. Regional universities are currently over-represented in the provision of external programs. With increased accessibility of on-campus enrolment, the proportion of online programs may change, and the requirement for capital growth funding could increase. Rapidly growing institutions such as USC urgently require new infrastructure to accommodate teaching and research programs, and significantly improved public transport networks to remove practical barriers to university participation and reduce the need for parking provision on campuses.

2002-2007 data on the higher education participation by region in Queensland reflect the economic climate of each area (growth in Gold Coast and Sunshine Coast, and decline in Fitzroy and Mackay) and financial feasibility for individuals to undertake study. Given the emphasis on and support for increasing enrolments from students living in rural and regional areas and given the location of USC there is the potential for growth.

e. The adequacy of government measures to provide for students who are required to leave home for secondary or post-secondary study

The Bradley report recommends positive reforms to assessment for Commonwealth assistance. Recommended reforms to the student income support system, particularly reduction of the age of independence for Austudy, will significantly improve the feasibility of study for rural and regional students studying both locally and at metropolitan institutions.

f. The educational needs of rural and regional students

In a state such as Queensland particularly, the diverse social and cultural needs of rural and regional students must be considered. Opportunities for young people to remain studying with their secondary school peers through a local institution, rather than requiring to move to a metropolitan campus, could influence retention and completion of higher education. It is therefore important to offer programs that develop the region by addressing current and projected skills shortages, create jobs, and which meet the goals and aspirations of community members. Associated infrastructure enhancement is also essential, such as effective internet provision, and integrated transport networks - requiring a coordinated multi-level government approach. Coordinated academic, social and

financial support must be in place that recognises the diverse context in which individuals now come to higher education, as more enter through non-traditional pathways. In rural and regional areas, many are the first in their family to attend a university. Recommended increase of the Disability Support Program will particularly assist regional institutions. Regional institutions have been demonstrated to often have a higher proportion of students with disabilities compared with metropolitan campuses. Greater flexibility of study options through deregulation should also facilitate enhanced attainment rates for students with disabilities.

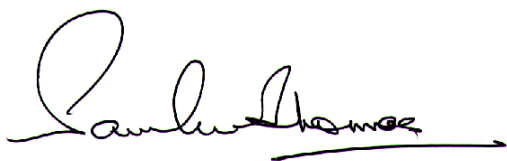
g. The impact of government measures and proposals on rural and regional communities

More support for universities like ours, attempting to catalyse job generation, should also be provided. If this is not done the regional "brain drain" will continue to threaten. Strengthening the provision of higher education in regional areas will see greater engagement between providers, business and industry, the community and schools - with opportunities to collaborate on research and innovation. Relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and Australian South Sea Islander communities, are developed enabling community capacity building through the participation of individuals in higher education and collaborative initiatives with higher education institutions, business and industry. Regional growth is supported through domestic and international students living in the region. There are economic and cultural benefits for the community as less people move away from the region and are therefore supporting local businesses and fostering the capacity and sustainability of the community, and the national economy. Local graduates are also more likely to be employed regionally and therefore continue to contribute to development of the region. Collaborative partnerships with industry and community will see a growth in internship opportunities for students allowing them to develop work-ready skills while studying, benefitting industry, and leading to enhanced graduate employment outcomes. Through regional engagement, university staff undertake leadership activities which value add to local organisations and businesses. Recommended reduction of nursing and teaching HELP debts for graduates working in those professions would benefit the community as graduates are more likely to be employed in their local region than metropolitan graduates.

h. Other related matters

There is some support among Queensland universities and the state government to develop a consortium approach to bidding on funds that will address social inclusion strategies to increase participation from, and in, rural and regional areas. Rather than independent submissions hinged on disparate and competing initiatives, a combined evidence-based approach to developing focussed projects to meet identified needs in two geographic areas, one metropolitan and one rural, is being tabled. In response to the social inclusion agenda, it is also recognised that a "whole of student life" approach to recruitment, education, and graduation be undertaken which supports an individual from initial raising of aspirations through to higher education and into graduate employment - as an integrated continuum. This is to be considered in so far as possible with changes in government and shifting priorities during the student life-cycle.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Paul Thomas', with a horizontal line underneath.

Professor Paul Thomas AM
Vice-Chancellor and President