

UNSW



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

Dear Ms Palmer,

Please find attached the UNSW response to the Rural and Regional Access to Secondary and Tertiary Education Opportunities Inquiry. UNSW welcomed the opportunity to provide feedback to this inquiry.

An important subgroup of Rural and Regional is Indigenous students. In consultation with the Director of our Indigenous Centre Nura Gili, I provide at the end of this submission a section directly addressing the issues as they relate to Indigenous students.

In making this submission UNSW would also like to bring to the Inquiry's attention that many students living in metropolitan areas face similar disadvantages in accessing University studies as the rural and regional students.

Yours sincerely

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Inquiry into Rural Regional Access to Secondary and Tertiary Education Opportunities

For the purposes of this submission the focus is primarily on university students with no comment on measures for secondary students.

- Current policy is clearly evidence based according to need, and coupled with an entitlement to a tertiary place for all qualifying students.
- There have been substantial improvements in the provision of student income supports that will benefit tertiary rural and regional students in particular.
- Consideration could be given to retrospective application for 2008 school leavers however it is unclear that this will improve access and equity issues. .
- From an equity point of view it is clear that the gap year concept is of particular benefit to HSES families rather than LSES families. 36% of independent youth allowance recipients live at home in families with incomes in excess of \$100,000 per annum and a further 18% of whom earn more than \$150,000 and 10% who are earn above \$200,000.
- Whether it is unfair to apply changes to those who completed school in 2008 and are currently in working in a 'gap year' (on the basis of gaining eligibility to independent youth allowance under previous eligibility arrangements) is unclear given the changes in income eligibility for and generosity of youth allowance and associated measures.

In response to question:

(a) Regarding the financial impact on rural and regional students who are attending metropolitan universities.

Positive changes in access and equity in relation to adequacy of income support for tertiary students currently being implemented in response to recommendations arising from the Bradley report are discussed below:

- Rural and regional students are recipients of very generous increases and measures in income and asset eligibility tests in relation to Youth Allowance.
- The changes to how income from scholarships is assessed for Centrelink purposes are significant and welcome. This will benefit all students in receipt of Centrelink income support and it provides a valuable incentive for school students to aspire to do their best in order to gain scholarships. Students in receipt of Youth Allowance can receive a scholarship as a true bonus without it impacting on their capacity to earn other income. Students in receipt of benefits can now earn almost double what they could previously before their entitlement is affected.
- The relocation subsidy and start up subsidy will enable rural and regional students to consider accessing places at metropolitan universities. This opens up new possibilities.
- Affordable and available accommodation in metropolitan Sydney may still be an issue.
- Many rural and regional students still do not have the option of attending metropolitan universities as the accommodation costs are beyond their means.
- None of these changes, though welcome, address the shortage of onsite and/or reasonable priced accommodation for students in the metropolitan areas.

- What is required is a funding model for Universities to offer priority places to rural and regional students with guaranteed subsidised housing.

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

- The new arrangements will provide more opportunities for rural and regional students to finish schooling in Year 12 in their regional areas. The situation will be further assisted by the Federal Government National Partnerships scheme.
- The measures will open up possibilities for rural and regional students to pursue higher education regionally as well as at metropolitan universities.

(c) The implication of current and proposed government measures on prospective students living in rural and regional areas;

- Prospective students living in rural and regional areas can now enjoy a sense of entitlement to higher education and at the same time enjoy greater affordability associated with exercising choice in relation to course of study. This is due to improved student income support arrangements and expansion of places made available and also due to the increased focus on support for LSES students.

(d) The short and long term impact of current and proposed government policies on regional university and TAFE enrolments;

- With figures that project a significantly lower increase in youth populations in country areas as compared to metropolitan areas as indicated in the Bradley report, it would seem that new measures to enable students to receive a relocation subsidy to pursue a particular course may benefit enrolments in rural and regional tertiary education institutions.
- If country institutions provide competitive attractive courses students will be drawn from metropolitan areas to study there. This will have positive benefits over the long term. This will enable universities to offer specialised degrees and boost local enrolments with direct and indirect social and economic benefits for regional areas.
- This is particularly the case if institutions are clever at marketing in metropolitan areas and offer appropriate competitive merit based scholarships to students. Rural and regional area enrolments will be attractive to increased numbers of students from metropolitan areas who will be seeking places as a result of the expansion of places created by changes in tertiary education sector. Country areas offer affordable housing and lifestyle benefits. This is especially true in comparison to city areas where metropolitan universities are often situated a long daily travelling distance from students despite being 'local'. The cultural distances between locations in metropolitan areas can be as great if not greater to those between country and city areas.
- There may be negative short term consequences in the adjustment period. This may occur as a result of the increased affordability of relocating to metropolitan options for country students. This will always be tempered by demand and availability of courses.

- The changes appear to provide regional tertiary education providers with a unique opportunity to develop and tap into growing domestic demand from metropolitan students whilst at the same time remaining attractive to their local constituents and international students.
- The relocation allowance will potentially increase the attractiveness of rural and regional campuses for disadvantaged remote area students.

(e) The adequacy of government measures to provide for students who are required to leave home for secondary or postsecondary study;

- As indicated in response to point (a) new arrangements greatly improve provisions for any student required to leave home to pursue a course in Yrs 11 and 12.
- A additional measure could be entitlement to improved fare subsidies that allow relocating students to return home at least four times per year. This will not only benefit rural and regional students but also boost attractiveness of rural institutions to metropolitan students.

(f) The educational needs of rural students;

- An ongoing challenge in relation to rural and regional students is to ensure the development of social capital in respect of higher education. Raising the awareness and aspirations of rural and regional students needs to be systematically addressed. Clear strategies need to be embedded that provide opportunities for students from primary age onwards to be exposed to the higher education environment (eg regular contact with universities, visits to universities etc).
- It is anticipated that the National the National Partnerships initiative will help address educational needs within rural schools.
- In addition there is need for an appropriately funded integrated year long support/transition program that assists rural and regional students to make the transition to university, the city and independence. Such a program would include development opportunities, assistance with accommodation, mentoring and internships.

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

- The impact of changes to the tertiary sector and the recent COAG agreement in relation to national youth training objectives and funding, should create opportunities for development in rural and regional communities. The combined effects of these measures should promote pathways between TAFE and university facilitating greater choice and mobility between courses and institutions. This must be a positive outcome.
- The focus on expanding higher educational achievements for young people generally (and in particular focusing on improving outcomes for the LSES equity target group) should facilitate expansion of development opportunities across the tertiary sector. Positive flow on effects to the various State run secondary education sectors would occur.

- The various measures introduced have the potential to invigorate rural and regional areas socially, economically and educationally.
- The national broadband plans will be crucial to the success of these developments. Tax benefits for families for expenditure on educational computer and internet technology will also contribute positively to these outcomes across the board.

(h) Other related matters.

There are many issues not able to be addressed within the scope of this discussion. One such issue is the question of the adequacy of measures to support low income families to ensure their children complete their secondary schooling in order to be in a position to even consider higher education. The greatest concern is long term income poverty in low income families which has the deepest impact on children's life chances.

- Of great concern is the inadequacy of family benefits for the most disadvantaged. Under new arrangements Family Tax Benefit B provided to low income families (unlike Family Tax Benefit A which is paid to all families with incomes up to \$160,000), will no longer be indexed to pension rates. This means value family tax benefits for low paid and jobless families will reduce over time. Until now Family Tax Benefit B has been indexed to keep pace with pensions which are indexed to wages. This is especially pertinent to low income and jobless families, 60% of whom are sole parent families.
- Poverty amongst jobless and low income households is an entrenched feature of Australian society and compounded in rural and regional areas. Whilst joblessness and homelessness are both listed priorities of the Federal Government's Social Inclusion agenda this has to date failed to be adequately translated into education and family policy measures.
- Whilst income and assets tests are applied and calculated with concession for business debts and families with assets, the issue of families who have low or no assets and low incomes is not adequately addressed to ensure access and equity to education in real terms.
- There needs to be greater measures introduced to support the disadvantaged students throughout students throughout their education (that is from primary school onwards). This could be achieved by targeting family tax benefits only to families with incomes below \$100,000 and instituting educational payments for children in families with low incomes to enable them to pay for basic school expenses and extracurricular activities.
- Social exclusion begins for poor children as soon as they attend school and realise that are unable to participate fully in school activities and events that are often celebrated hallmarks of school achievement. These may include inability to participate in ordinary school excursions through to playing in the school band or other cost bearing extracurricular activities

- A suggestion could be that schools could be paid an allowance for every child who is in a family in receipt of Family Tax Benefit B that goes to invisibly fund important school expenses (books, extra curricula activities etc).
- Current tax measures such as the education benefit for families to purchase computer and internet technology are only available to those who work and have sufficient income to pay for these items in the first place. Youth allowance changes whilst moving in the right direction fail to address the issues related to deep long term poverty and income insecurity.
- There is an urgent need for integrated support programs and partnerships from pre-recruitment, throughout the recruitment process and onto transition into tertiary studies. Programs that fully support rural and regional and indigenous students on their journey from primary school to University must address financial, academic and individual development needs. This would ensure students not only have access to appropriate financial support, but also have the opportunity to develop the necessary social capital and aspirations that would lead to successfully gaining a place at University. Once at University they should be given the opportunity to develop the skills and attributes required to successfully complete their tertiary educational journey

Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Committee

Respond on Indigenous Students

Abstudy does not provide an adequate living allowance for Indigenous students. For those students coming from rural and regional areas who have to live away from home it is even more difficult. It is impossible to pay rent, eat and cover the cost of text books, course materials and any potential field trips that may arise. Students are forced into a situation where they have to work to subsidise their Abstudy, which is then reduced and further increasing the hours of paid employment students need to undertake to survive and stay enrolled at university. This in turn impacts upon the retention and success of Indigenous students, who are already educationally disadvantaged.

Further to this an increasing number of Indigenous students do not receive Abstudy (and this often means they are not eligible for many scholarships) due to a very restrictive mean-testing that does not take into account the reality of Indigenous peoples' family and home life, in particular, extended family and kinship responsibilities. For Indigenous students who are not entitled to Abstudy living close to the university is still a struggle, but for those students from rural and regional areas it becomes impossible to attend university.

In recent years the number of trips home that Indigenous students are eligible for, have reduced. This creates difficulties for Indigenous students who must return home a number of times a year for family and cultural matters, in particular for funerals. This results in many students being unable to remain at university.

Another matter that impacts upon Indigenous students is the measures that restrict the payments students are eligible to receive if they chose to attend a university to undertake a degree which is also offered at a university closer to their home address. Different

universities offer different types of programs within the same degree areas and also have different types and levels of support. Indigenous students should be able to elect to study at a university that suits their needs and preference and still be eligible for support, such as living away from home away.

Currently the government guidelines of the types of residential and enabling programs that they will fund for student travel and accommodation are too narrow. At UNSW we are fully subsidising students to attend and participate in the UNSW Indigenous Pre-Program. It is a program which has shown consistently that it prepares students for university study and that the students who complete this program have a higher rate of retention and success than students who enroll into degree programs without completing the pre-programs. As the numbers continue to grow, UNSW will soon have to restrict the numbers of people it can fund to participate in this program and therefore a number of Indigenous people will be denied access to the program and hence to overcoming the educational disadvantage that they are facing.

Indigenous students from rural and regional areas require the same standards and levels of education and the same choices as every other Australian. At this point of time this is severely limited due to the financial cost of studying, travelling and the low level of financial support through Abstudy. Abstudy needs to be at a level that provides a liveable allowance, does not restrict eligibility based on a rule that a closer university offers the same or similar course and that has a means test and eligibility criteria based on the realities of Aboriginal family and community life. Furthermore programs that are shown to increase the retention and success of educational outcomes from Indigenous students should be supported and funded to ensure access for Indigenous people.