

Submission to the Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport

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

7 August 2009

The following comments are responses to the terms of reference provided by the Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Committee.

A) Financial impact on rural and regional students attending metropolitan secondary and tertiary schools

Recent changes to student study allowances have worsened the impact on rural and regional students, particularly those participating in a gap year to gain work and life experiences prior to study. Beyond institutions allowing for a two-year deferment, government needs to recognise the difficulties that students face especially in an era of rising unemployment. The student start up scholarship for students that relocate to metropolitan areas could be granted only to those that study in specialised areas, especially if there is a shortage of skills in these areas. Otherwise, the scholarship is further incentive for students to move away from rural and regional areas and further accentuates the exodus of school leavers from these areas. Government should be looking at long-term capacity building strategies by supporting efforts to offer courses of study that are linked to rural and regional skill shortages.

B) Education alternatives for rural and regional students wanting to study in rural and regional areas

The model of tertiary education in rural and regional areas needs attention. Rather than duplicating services from metropolitan headquarters, education providers need to be part of the wider community capacity building efforts. The existence of more than 150 publicly funded university campuses has raised questions regarding campus viability, return on public expenditure and university efficiency. An underlying problem according to many commentators is that universities have few connections to the communities in which they operate. For example, Garlick (1998) states that few universities have sought to tailor the nature of their teaching program delivery ... to meet the particular economic strengths and needs of the regional locations. As a result, the contribution of the university to the regional economy and national objectives may be lower than it might otherwise be.

C) Implications of government measures on prospective students living in rural and regional areas

Government needs to allocate resources to building viable communities from an asset-based viewpoint. Similarly, regions need to respond by identifying the employment gaps, regional skill shortages, potential growth industries, supply of secondary students and education programs to meet these needs. The socio-economic status of families living in regional areas should not preclude access to tertiary education. The reason why students choose a tertiary institution was canvassed by a recent survey





conducted by Southern Cross University. Data collected indicated the principal reason for selecting a university was *“because it was close to home”*. Compelling evidence of this is the fact that, at Coffs Harbour, which has a strong and expanding university presence, participation rates are two to three times greater than the rest of the Mid North Coast. In comparison, no doubt because of its extensive TAFE network, the Mid North Coast has a level of TAFE attendance, which is consistent with the NSW average of 2.9%. Providing access to tertiary education for students in rural and regional areas is an essential component in building regional social capital and increasing regional economic benefits.

D) Short and long term impact of government policies on regional secondary and tertiary enrolments

Inadequacy and inequity of regional loading equations and subsequent ‘stealing of enrolments’ from regional areas needs attention. A review of enrolment mechanisms and admission scores based solely on supply and demand is required. Equitable access to tertiary education is an important component of a fair Australia. It is also an important means of building the stock of skill supply, thereby addressing one of the key impediments to economically viable non-metropolitan communities. Existing residents could be allocated preferences to ensure equity. Clearly some areas are missing as a consequence of the proliferation of campuses of questionable viability across Australia. Port Macquarie-Hastings and the Mid North Coast area is an example of one such area that is missing out, despite the fact that it is the fastest growing Local Government area in New South Wales. In fact, of Australian cities with a population exceeding 30,000, Port Macquarie (Hastings) is the only one without a university presence of any significance. There is also a significantly lower University participation rate recorded across the Mid North Coast. The qualification rates are also well below the state and national average at considerable lost opportunity cost to the region and Australia.

E) Adequacy of government measures to provide for students that leave home for secondary and tertiary study

The recent introduction of the relocation allowance for students that leave home for secondary and tertiary study is encouraging. However, there should also be measures to ensure that tertiary education is provided in areas where there is (i) an adequate supply of students (ii) recognised regional shortages in identified vocations and professions and (iii) identified industry growth areas. From this, incentives could be offered to local students living in such regions or else incentives offered to students in neighbouring regions.

F) Educational needs of rural and regional students

Low socio-economic areas need to be provided with merit-based allocations so that income and assets do not preclude enrolments from school leavers in this category. Added to this, the older aged profile of regional populations should strengthen the case for a regional university presence. The outflow of young people in areas like the Port Macquarie-Hastings is of serious economic and social concern for regional communities. Regional centres that have universities have much more balanced aged profiles, because it helps to reduce (not stop) the outflow, but also attracts young



people from elsewhere (including international students) who make a significant contribution to the economy and social fabric of their communities.

G) Impact of government policy on rural and regional communities

The Federal Government's intent, as recently announced by Minister Julia Gillard in response to the findings of the Bradley Review into Higher Education, is to increase the number of 25 to 34 year olds with a university degree or higher, from the current figure of approximately 30% to 40% by 2025. A University campus or significant tertiary education centre in Port Macquarie would assist Government to achieve this goal as it would serve a total population of about 150,000 people who live within commutable distance from Port Macquarie. This area includes Greater Taree to the south and Kempsey to the north. Tertiary education in rural and regional communities is increasingly marginalised due to critical mass issues and the inefficiencies that result from duplication of services.

The solution

Council proposes to introduce a community dimension into a Port Macquarie based tertiary education centre so as to ensure a matching of courses to the current and planned competitive advantages of this region. Such an association will stimulate the development of leading edge skills and technology, research and development, a targeted injection of graduate skills and the formation of knowledge based spin off companies. Such efforts will require an extensive feasibility study and the collaborative efforts from all levels of government, business leaders, industry groups and education providers.

