



10 August 2009

Dear Sir / Madam

**Response to the Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee
Inquiry on:**

‘An assessment of the adequacy of government measures to provide equitable access to secondary and post-secondary education opportunities to students from rural and regional communities attending metropolitan institutions, and metropolitan students attending regional universities or technical and further education (TAFE) colleges’

This response draws particularly on the expertise of this University’s Rural Focus Group which has been established to advise on issues that relate specifically to rural community needs and work towards developing a framework to address relevant issues which support sustainable practices for rural communities.

The University is committed to ensuring its students are supported throughout their educational experience and has responded positively and consistently to the needs of rural and isolated students.

The University has 1941 enrolled undergraduate and postgraduate students who are identified as coming from rural and isolated communities. The number of students in this category represents just under 6% of total University enrolments.

At an undergraduate level, the majority of these students are non-recent school leavers and enrolments span all courses the University offers with particular emphasis on Arts, Engineering, Health Sciences and Science.

We have selected three of the Inquiry reference points under which to submit information and comment.

a) the financial impact on rural and regional students who are attending metropolitan secondary schools, universities or TAFE;

The Rural Focus Group is concerned about the financial impact on students from a rural and isolated background who are attending University.

The University provides support to students experiencing financial difficulty and whose academic work may suffer as a result through its Financial Assistance Office and its Scholarships and Prizes Office.

Assistance is by way of an interest-free loans and bursaries program and includes provision for such expenses as textbooks; course related equipment; clinical placements; compulsory excursions. It also includes assistance with housing bonds/rent in advance and rent arrears; medical bills; utility and household bills; computer purchases.

This assistance is also available to students who are required as part of their study to undertake rural placements.

1. Financial Assistance

Of the total number of students who accessed financial assistance in 2004, rural and isolated students represented 4.46%. This has increased annually and in 2008 these students represented 15.09% of students seeking assistance.

This presents a growing concern that the financial impact on rural and isolated students attending metropolitan universities is increasing whilst at the same time external support mechanisms appear to be decreasing and the University is required to “fill the gap”.

Students can also apply for assistance to cover rural placement costs where they are required as a part of their degree programs to undertake such placements. Students can apply for assistance at any time of the year to assist with placement costs.

2. First Year Bursary

The University of Sydney First Year Bursary, valued at \$2,000 is a one-off start up bursary, to assist students from low SES backgrounds (including rural/isolated areas) to cover costs such as housing bonds, computers and textbooks.

In 2007, 46 bursaries were provided to students from rural/isolated areas totaling \$92,000.

3. Scholarships

The University’s Scholarships and Prizes Office administers scholarships and prizes for undergraduate and postgraduate coursework students at the University of Sydney.

The Commonwealth Accommodation Scholarships (CAS) of \$4,415 per annum (indexed) requires that students must be undergraduate and be required to relocate from a regional or remote area to undertake higher education.

The University of Sydney Access Scholarship of \$6,000 per annum (indexed) is open to students of academic ability who have been disadvantaged (financial, disability or rural/regional). Scholarships are allocated according to need with up to five (5) Access Scholarships reserved for rural students applying through the usual channels, but recommended by the Country Education Foundation of Australia.

These Access Scholarships cover the normal full-time length of enrolment. The University increased the allocation of funds for new Access scholarships in 2007 because the number of eligible applicants has been steadily growing each year and the University recognised that these scholarships are very successful in assisting students to achieve their full potential.

4. Other scholarships accessible to rural students

In addition to the Commonwealth Accommodation Scholarships and the University of Sydney Access Scholarships, rural students are able to apply for other scholarships. There are six scholarships for which being a rural/remote student is a requirement, and of those one is for female students; three are specific to the study of Economics and Business and one for students commencing at the Conservatorium of Music.

f) the education needs of rural and regional students

The Faculty of Veterinary Science has been increasingly concerned in recent years about the issues of decreasing intake of students from rural communities, and the increasing costs incurred by students required to undertake rural placements as part of the final year of their training. These issues are of importance as there are growing global concerns about urbanisation of the profession, with inadequate numbers of veterinarians servicing rural mixed practices and engaging in important roles in veterinary public health that provide food security and safety.

In 2008, only 10 students of an intake of 120 into the Bachelor of Veterinary Science (BVSc) degree considered they had a 'rural background'. Staff have been aware that even the best potential students from rural areas, where high school examination performance is less competitive than many urban schools, have been unable to gain entry to our degrees because of the extremely high UAI (Universities Admission Index) required due to competition.

To partially address this issue, in 2010, the Faculty will introduce an adjustment to the criteria for admission to the BVSc under a Rural Students Entry Scheme. Current NSW Higher School Certificate or interstate equivalent applicants may be offered a place in this scheme if they meet a number of criteria, including:

- their UAI is not more than five points below the main round cut off mark for the year of entry;
- they have completed at least the last 4 years of secondary education at a rural school ("rural" is the area encompassing the rural NSW Area Health Service regions or the equivalent definition of rural applicable to other States; all of NSW is considered rural with the exception of Sydney, Central Coast, Newcastle, Wollongong, the Blue Mountains and their surrounding areas);
- they have had a permanent home address in a rural area of at least four years at any time prior to their application; and
- are able to demonstrate a commitment to a career in an animal related area in a rural setting (this may include a record of involvement and achievement in community affairs at school or local community level in a rural environment).

It is expected that this scheme will assist a small number of country students that have previously just missed out on places in our BVSc degree. However this initiative does not address the broader issue of growing inequity between rural and urban schools on competition for entry placements at the University of Sydney.

The cost of attending rural placements appears a major concern for most students completing their veterinary degrees. In their final year, student 'interns' are required to spend almost half their year working in the Sydney and Camden clinics, and for the remainder they are required to work in multiple rural locations, including Rural Public Practice (RPP) where students work under the supervision of affiliate veterinary public health professionals, and Rural Mixed Practice (RMP) where the interns work in rural veterinary practices. These units ensure our graduates develop an understanding of rural community issues prior to graduation, but our surveys of their learning experiences consistently identify that the costs of frequent relocation are considerable and increased debt burdens on new graduates, particularly as the relocations compromise their ability to hold part time employment positions in Sydney to support

their training. There is limited financial support for these students during this important year of experiential learning.

The Faculty of Agriculture, Food and Natural Resources (FAFNR) shares a number of concerns with the Faculty of Veterinary Science about the educational needs of students from rural and regional communities, and the needs of urban students undertaking rural placements. In particular, these shared concerns include the decreased intake of students from rural backgrounds, the high costs associated with rural students moving to Sydney to study and the costs associated with urban students carrying out professional experience in rural areas.

The FAFNR draws approximately 20% of its undergraduates from rural and regional areas. Whilst the UAI entry levels for FAFNR degrees may prevent some rural students from attending this University, these UAIs are substantially less than the BVSc. It is the attraction of other rurally-based universities (University of New England and Charles Sturt University) that is a bigger impediment for increased rural student enrolments in FAFNR. This attraction to rural universities is partly due to convenience, the costs of re-locating to, and living in, Sydney and the different focus of the faculties relating to agriculture at these universities.

An example of how our metropolitan location is an impediment to rural student retention, is that in our experience rural students rarely take advantage of bridging courses or summer school units because of the costs of travel and accommodation during January and February. This has undoubtedly led, more or less directly, to some rural students dropping out of their degrees due to poor preparation (not attending bridging courses) and/or a lack of opportunity to pass units they have previously failed (not taking advantage of summer school). The FAFNR has no particular scheme to attract rural students, although a requirement of the Flexible Entry Scheme (a place offered to candidates with UAIs up to 5 below the cut-off, if places are available) is that students demonstrate, in writing, a commitment to, or interest in, agriculture. This requirement tends to advantage rural students.

With regard to undergraduates carrying out professional experience (PE) placements in rural locations, all students, regardless of their home address, face the issue of added expenses during these placements. In FAFNR, professional experience is contained within a compulsory 6 credit point unit. Students are not subsidised and not supervised or monitored by an academic during their placements. Some students complain about PE compromising their ability to earn money during holiday periods (when all PE is to be done), but others actually earn money at their PE location. Also, some students feel aggrieved at having to pay HECS for the PE unit and then having to organise and pay for their own placements within that unit.

h) other related matters

Health disciplines

The faculties of Pharmacy, Medicine, Dentistry, Nursing and Midwifery and Health Sciences have established key initiatives to support students undertaking professional placements.

Faculty of Pharmacy

There is continued development of the 'GAP Program' an online teaching tool consisting of three Rural Health teaching modules aimed at all health students. The modules have a particular emphasis on inter-professional learning and have been developed specifically to assist students prepare for their placements in rural sites. The Project has been well received by

students from the faculties of Health Sciences, Pharmacy, Nursing and Midwifery and Medicine in the Northern Rivers. Some experience with individual students in Health Sciences has worked well.

The Faculty of Pharmacy has had a long association with the School of Rural Health in Dubbo and continues to pursue opportunities to place more students in this area.

Faculty of Dentistry

Plans for a combined University of Sydney, Greater Western Area Health Service and Charles Sturt University Public Dental Clinic are progressing well. The Clinic would be adjacent to the School of Rural Health in Dubbo and it is anticipated that the Clinic will be opened in January 2011.

The faculties of Dentistry and Medicine have completed a 10 student accommodation block in Dubbo with five of the student rooms aimed at Dentistry students being able to spend an extended time in supervised training in Dubbo and other associated dental clinics.

Faculty of Health Sciences

In 2008 and 2009 students from a number of Health disciplines took the opportunity to visit Orange and Dubbo and were able to meet with local specialists in their discipline area. Students found these experiences rewarding and enriching to their studies and more visits to these areas are planned for 2010.

Sydney Medical Program

The creation of new student accommodation in Dubbo has increased the on campus capacity to 35 beds. This increase will allow most of the Medical students to be able to take part in longer clinical attachments in their last two years of the course.

More student accommodation is planned for Orange as the Base Hospital moves to the Bloomfield site. Building of a new hospital will commence in 2011 which will include student accommodation.

The **University Rural Department of Health at Lismore** is flourishing with joint ventures from the University of Wollongong and University of Western Sydney. Their strong research bases will be enhanced by these new cooperative ventures.

The **Broken Hill University Rural Department of Health** continues to provide a unique experience for Medical and Nursing students especially and its association with the University of Adelaide and Western Sydney will enhance the student experience.

The **Centre for Agricultural Health and Safety in Moree** remains at the fore front of practical and applied research. Students from the Faculty of Health Science especially have been involved in this area over several years and have been exposed to this unique experience.

Other disciplines

In June 2007, the University of Sydney established the Rural Focus Group to address issues that relate specifically to rural community needs in non-health disciplines and work towards developing a framework to address relevant issues which support sustainable practices for rural communities.

Its particular tasks include:

- Assist in developing policy on rural community issues;
- To identify the priorities for future research in rural community needs, and to disseminate this information in rural communities;

- To encourage cross-disciplinary research into rural community needs and to disseminate this information to rural communities;
- Increase awareness among staff and students of the University of the needs of rural communities; and
- Support generic educational modules for discipline-specific courses on rural community issues.

The Rural Focus Group has been central to two internal learning and teaching grants. The first investigated inter-professional student experiences in rural New South Wales and the second examined professional/field experience components undertaken in rural settings.

IPRural: developing inter-professional student experience in rural New South Wales

The project identified professional placements undertaken by University of Sydney students, and particularly those which are rurally located. Eleven of the 14 faculties offer programs which include professional experience each year, either as an internship or work experience, requiring students to enter a workplace for one to thirty two weeks.

The project examined student problems associated with rural placements and sought ways in which these could be overcome. One possible solution was the development of 'rural hubs'. These would be based on existing University facilities, in communities where the university already has some presence.

The University is establishing partnerships with rural Chambers of Commerce, local councils and other relevant development corporations in community areas. These partnerships help underpin the support provided to rural and isolated students attending University and metropolitan students undertaking rural placements.

IP Rural: Rural Hubs to support Inter-professional Student Experiences

The second project builds on the work of the initial research and aims to pilot "rural hubs" as conceptual, material and operational entities with the communities of Dubbo and Broken Hill.

The work of the Rural Focus Group connects with many other aspects of the University's operations. The establishment of the University's Social Inclusion Unit will also assist in developing programs that support rural and isolated students social needs and broader involvement in University activities.

I trust this information and perspective will assist your Inquiry.

Yours sincerely



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