

Great Southern TAFE Submission

Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Committee

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

This submission makes reference to the Committee's interest in:

- the financial impact on rural and regional students who are attending metropolitan secondary schools, universities or TAFE;
- the education alternatives for rural and regional students wanting to study in regional areas;
- the implications of current and proposed government measures on prospective students living in rural and regional areas; and
- the adequacy of government measures to provide for students who are required to leave home for secondary or post-secondary study.

While there is a dearth of rigorous research on the relationship between the Youth Allowance at the independent rate and participation in university studies, there are strong indicators that financial arrangements for regional students significantly influence their decisions about future study.

Deferral rates for students in the Albany education district (in the Great Southern region of WA) are considerably higher than those for the metropolitan region. In 2009 20% of metropolitan based year 12 graduates offered a university place deferred their studies. In the Albany education district 80% of students deferred their studies taking a 'gap year' that revolves around paid employment.

Students in regional area undertake a gap year, not from choice, but rather as a necessity, saving for expenses incurred by having to relocate to the metropolitan area to undertake university studies, and to ensure they meet the minimum requirements for access to the Youth Allowance at the independent rate.

Recent changes to the eligibility requirements for Youth Allowance will require students to take a "gap two years" and meet more stringent work requirements during this period. There will be two consequences of this:

- The first relates to the need for a student to demonstrate a period of continuous employment for 18 months. In regional WA many young people rely on seasonal employment, and it will be difficult to demonstrate a period of unbroken employment – the more so as the economic downturn is impacting on youth employment opportunities.
- The second consequence is that the longer the time of deferral, the less likely it is that a student will in fact take up the offer of a university place.

An extract of ABS census data (2006) provides a comparison between the city electorate of Curtin and the regional electorate of O' Connor – in which the Great Southern region is located - shows how the low levels of qualification attainment of residents of the O'Connor electorate in comparison to a metropolitan electorate.

Electorate	Tertiary degree	Ranking of 150	TAFE	Ranking of 150
O'Connor	9.9%	124	25.0%	85
Curtin	40.8%	9	18.6%	145

Quite clearly the changes to eligibility for Youth Allowance at the independent rate will have a long term deleterious effect on participation rates in higher education for young people from regional WA. Any policy which has the unintended consequence of further entrenching regional disadvantage should be reviewed and changed.

Great Southern TAFE is cognizant of the problems that the decrease in completion of higher level qualifications is projected to generate for the Australian economy. The Review into Higher Education (2009) identified national tertiary participation targets to meet the demands of the future labour market and to promote social inclusion. These targets were for:

- 40% of 25-34 year olds to have attained a qualification at bachelor level or above by 2020 (currently 29%)
- An increase undergraduate enrolments from low socio-economic groups from 16% to 20% by 2020

The COAG intention to double the number of VET higher qualifications (diploma and advanced diploma) between 2009 and 2020 will contribute towards these recommended targets.

Great Southern TAFE has responded to these policy priorities by strengthening the articulation agreements between the College and universities through the College developed UniLink program:

- College Policy is that each Diploma/Adv Diploma on scope must have an articulation agreement and that this agreement is supported by a MoU with the university
- Clear documentation of articulation arrangements – both paper based and web based <http://www.unilink.wa.edu.au>

Clearly documenting and promoting the articulation arrangements negotiated by the College gives certainty to students who may otherwise lack confidence in the willingness of a university to accept their TAFE qualification.

The key to opening up higher education opportunities in the thin markets of rural and regional Australia is for TAFEs and Universities to share infrastructure and implement pathways from school through TAFE to university. This will keep the costs down by utilising existing

infrastructure. For several degree programs in high demand by regional Australia, TAFE is well positioned to deliver under an auspiced agreement. Qualifications that immediately lend themselves to this model of delivery are nursing, early childhood education and business.

Great Southern TAFE currently delivers the Bachelor Science (Nursing) under an auspice arrangement with Curtin University School of Nursing, and this model of delivery has been highly successful.

It should however be noted that TAFE colleges are very much 'price takers' in these auspiced arrangements and consideration needs to be given to developing more transparent funding arrangements.

The Budget 2009 announcement for Structural Adjustment Funds remains pending, with suggestions that the funds will again be restricted to Class A HEP (universities). Providing TAFE with access to these funds would recognise the centrality of the role regional TAFE's can play in reducing the cost of delivery of higher level qualifications to their communities.

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