

Wednesday, 5 June 2013 Office of the Vice Chancellor

Committee Secretary
Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee
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Dear Committee Secretary

Value of a justice reinvestment approach to criminal justice in Australia

I appreciate that the closing date for submissions to this Inquiry has past. However, I wanted to take the opportunity to bring to the Committee's attention an initiative (the *Support and Divert Project*) that Southern Cross University has been progressing which I hope may be of interest to your deliberations. This Project directly relates to terms of reference (c) and (d).

As a brief background, Southern Cross University (SCU) is headquartered in regional New South Wales (Lismore, in the Northern Rivers region), with campuses in Coffs Harbour (Mid-North Coast NSW) and in the Gold Coast (Queensland). We offer undergraduate and postgraduate courses across a range of professional areas; of relevance to the *Support and Divert Project*, this includes our schools of Law and Justice, Health and Human Sciences, and Arts and Social Sciences. In addition, SCU (with government support) has been investing heavily in the development of on-line learning technologies and state-of-the art clinical learning and simulation laboratories. Enhancing profession-specific learning opportunities for students and practitioners alike, in remote, regional and urban contexts is an important focus.

In that context, SCU has been seeking to develop a cutting edge continuing professional development (CPD) program for professionals and para-professionals working in the health, disability, social and legal services with clients suffering mental health and intellectual disability. The *Support and Divert Project* aims at reducing the incarceration of people who are mentally ill and/or intellectually disabled by improving the capacity and confidence of para-professionals and professionals to better support their clients who have highly complex needs.

Our research has shown that there is an urgent need for para/professionals to be better prepared to ensure early assessment, seamless cross-sectoral case management and through care, improved representation before courts and relevant tribunals or boards, better access to diversionary programs and other services, and improved post release support. The development of these skills would help maximise the opportunities for community-based recovery for these clients, while minimising institutionalisation and incarceration rates, as reflected in terms of reference (c) and (d). Hanover Research, which was engaged to assess potential demand for the program, concluded that there was no comparable program to the one being proposed.

One of the challenges for the University has been the difficulty in accessing financial support for the development of the CPD modules. We have estimated this cost at \$345,000; this is in addition to an estimated \$440,000 the University expects to make to the Project as an in-kind contribution over five years. The proposal itself has been very well-received, and at least one state government agency has expressed an interest in providing fifty scholarships for staff to undertake the program. However, this support does not extend to the costs involved in the up-front development phase (which includes developing high quality online materials that can be flexibly accessed by participants).

In this regard, the economic and social benefits of the Project cut across administrative and even state-federal lines. So, while there is general agreement with the underlying principle that more needs to be done to support people with highly complex needs, and that this Project may be part of the solution, the 'responsibility' to financially support its initial development does not neatly fit within any one government agency. A justice reinvestment approach, if adopted, would need to ensure that initiatives aimed at new ways of supporting disadvantaged groups, such as the *Support and Divert Project*, can be supported.

I look forward to the Committee's report on this important issue.

Yours sincerely

Professor Peter Lee
Vice Chancellor