

Senate Inquiry – Rural and regional access to secondary and tertiary educational opportunities

These notes are a record of a professional conversation on 3 August, 2009 between John Scott, Managing Director, C Y O'Connor College of TAFE; Grant Arthur, Deputy Director, Wheatbelt Development Commission; and Delia Pascua-McGlew, Director, Academic Services, C Y O'Connor College of TAFE

Context

Regional Western Australia has a long history of sending students to Perth to access secondary and tertiary education. The affordability of accommodation in Perth has drastically decreased, with the consequence that some people have been locked out of post-secondary education opportunities.

[Real-life example of affordability issue: Enrolled Nursing students from the Wheatbelt are required to undertake clinical placements in metropolitan hospitals. With no financial support for accommodation, they recently banded together and leased the unit owned by their lecturer – the only way they could afford to stay in Perth during the period of their clinical placement.]

There is no major regional centre in the Wheatbelt and this factor, coupled with the proximity to Perth, means that most people go to Perth to access higher education.

There are limited opportunities to access higher education courses in the Wheatbelt via external studies - a mode of delivery that historically has low rates of success.

Some obstacles exist, such as lack of accommodation in the Wheatbelt regional centres for post-secondary students; and lack of (or lean) subsidies for transport.

Wheatbelt people need alternatives to enable them to access tertiary studies in the Wheatbelt. The consideration is that a solution may lie in the development of a flexible and supported delivery model via the TAFE infrastructure which exists across four sites in the Wheatbelt (an area slightly smaller than the state of Victoria).

There are 23 district high schools in the Wheatbelt. An opportunity exists to examine the feasibility to develop these schools – many of which have low

enrolments in secondary school – as ‘Community Learning Centres’ to service the broader needs of people living within these smaller regional communities.

Flexible learning strategies are fundamental to delivering post-secondary education/training in the Wheatbelt. Yet there is not enough funding to support the development of courses that have hitherto been only delivered by traditional face-to-face methods; and there are not sufficient student support services available (such as accommodation and transport assistance).

There are large numbers of Wheatbelt families who live in poverty. TAFE fees and the costs of student learning resources (books and study guides) are a real barrier to education/training. In parallel, there is a significant issue regarding low levels of literacy and numeracy in TAFE students. This is particularly noticeable with students re-engaging with education and training (eg women re-entering the workforce) and undertaking higher level qualifications, such as the Certificate IV in Preparation for Entry into Enrolled Nursing. A disproportionate allocation of resources is being invested to address this problem.

Students other than apprentices and trainees receive no financial assistance while studying. There are no scholarship opportunities available. This makes it particularly challenging for women re-entering the workforce. Federal funding models are not sufficiently flexible to apply to the economic/social conditions that exist in the Wheatbelt.

Due to regional economic growth, the needs for education and training services are changing. This makes it all the more important to have flexible delivery models that enable providers of education and training to respond to these circumstances.

The decision by Curtin University to re-locate the agricultural programmes away from the Muresk campus (located near Northam) at the end of 2010 provides the opportunity to develop a broad-based centre of expertise in regional and remote education.

The imbalance in recent funding announcements has not gone unnoticed. There were no successful allocations for EIF Round 2 funding in WA. Furthermore, there were no successful TIIFT allocations for locations to the north and east of Perth. EIF Round 3 guidelines appear to work against a cross-sectoral application while preserving the opportunity for the individual agency applicants to make application in their own right (ie only one bite of the apple).