

Submission by to the Commonwealth Inquiry into Infrastructure and the Development of Australia's Regional Areas

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Preamble

The University of Southern Queensland is a young dynamic regional University with claims to international leadership in flexible learning, and significant collaborations with industry and government in regionally focused research and development. It operates from a central campus in Toowoomba on the Darling Downs as well as from its Wide Bay Campus for the Information Age located at Hervey bay.

The University services the needs of 20,000 students throughout regional and metropolitan Australia and around the world. The University is the largest provider of international education for students studying in their own counties, of any University in Australia. The University is the third largest Distance Education provider among all Australian universities with a history of some 25 years in the delivery of quality education and training programs to people living in remote and regional Australia as well as in the capital cities. Students are supported by staff located on campus and also by 25 Regional Liaison Offices throughout Eastern Australia.

The purpose of this submission is to draw to the attention of the Standing Committee on Primary Industries and Regional Services, USQ's exceptional skills in bringing education and training, research and development activities to people living outside the metropolitan areas. USQ submits that its innovative programs of delivering education, training, and professional development by various modes of flexible delivery including the Internet has valuable implications for the Government in considering improving infrastructure in regional Australia.

Significant facts about USQ include

- Yearly turnover in excess of \$102 million
- Approx. \$40 million capital works program since 1995
- Last year earned approx. \$11.3 million in export dollars through its International Students program.
- Lowest per EFTSU operating grant funding by Government of any University in Australia, with less than 65% of total annual revenue from public purse.
- Annual economic injection into region's economy in excess of \$100 million.
- Although a Queensland regional university, USQ has one of the highest profiles of any Australian university in overseas education markets. In 1997 it became the first distance education facility in the world to win international quality accreditation to ISO9001, and was the only Australian university to demonstrate

complete Internet-based award programs to the Commonwealth Ministers of Education gathering in Botswana, June 1997.

- Approx. 1200 full-time equivalent staff.
- USQ business arm, INDELTA, collaborates with industry in commercial Information Technology, Education and Training initiatives.
- These commercial initiatives include the delivery of university and professional development courses, and high school curriculum over the Internet and through a variety of flexible learning programs.

Building the Regions and Skilling Regional Australia

The basis for rejuvenation of regional and remote areas must be seen in the revolutionary changes in communications, technology and in the new ability to provide learning opportunities to dispersed communities.

By using the wide range of modern communications technologies, not least the Internet, it is possible to overcome the tyranny of distance in a far more effective way than ever before. For the first time in the history of this or any country, it is now possible to provide opportunities for people in remote areas which are of equal quality, equal depth, and equal breadth with those opportunities available to people living in metropolitan areas. This requires a long experience in providing education and training, and particular skills in using the modern multimedia capability so that Queenslanders may be motivated to take part in structured education and training programs.

The University of Southern Queensland has precisely the research and development and teaching skills necessary to bring to regional Australians the opportunities necessary for them to skill and reskill themselves without unnecessary disruption to their social and workplace lives. The beginnings of a rejuvenation of rural and remote areas lie in rekindling a view that people in the bush are cared about and have access to the wide range of entertainment, education and information sources enjoyed by their metropolitan cousins. With such training there comes the incentive to look for work and to develop local opportunities for employment for themselves and for others and the beginning of a rekindling of the view that the regions provide a perfect match of lifestyle and opportunity.

The University of Southern Queensland wishes to explore with Government a range of initiatives which it has begun and continues to develop and which can be used to meet the Government's plans with regard to servicing remote and regional areas of the nation. It is essential that the building of infrastructure and the building of communications networks with the consequent improvement in lifestyle and opportunity is seen as a cooperative effort between government, industry and the University. The University of Southern Queensland is used to developing partnerships which are based upon outcomes and which are well planned, and executed in the best interests of the client. Although the University is totally committed to traditional values of excellence in teaching, learning, research and scholarship, it has developed unique skills in the transfer of training programs and necessary job skills to people in its broad communities.

Times have changed, it is no longer possible to satisfy the expectations of regional Australians without providing them with access and incentive both to job opportunities and to life enhancing experiences. The ability now to combine modern electronic based communications with a properly structured support network of people is typical of what USQ has been doing through its regional liaison centres around the state and the country for many years. USQ seeks the opportunity to demonstrate to government its unique skills in delivery and its range of entrepreneurial activities, which it wishes to make available to the wider community. USQ's partnership with others in the international company e-Education Ltd as a provider of robust timely internet based programs is an example of its responsible entrepreneurialship at the tertiary level. The University's involvements with local high schools in developing high school curricula via the Internet shows that its interests extend beyond tertiary studies. Similarly its involvement as a partner in the Trainingnet initiative, gives it the ability to provide ongoing professional education and training using small bite, purpose designed programs for professional and sub-professional people so that study may occur without disruption to their professional and personal lifestyles.

The University suggests that the provision of learning and education training opportunities to people in remote areas and the consequent development of job opportunities is intimately related to the provision of significantly enhanced communications and transport infrastructure within the regions and with the provision of access to skills which are user oriented. Excellent USQ examples of such skills are:

- the Land Use Study Centre, where the State Government's initiative in funding a Research Professorship has been greatly beneficial and will enable the extension work in regional Queensland to continue.
- the University's Joint Chair in Rural Nursing with the Toowoomba Hospital Board is a groundbreaking initiative.
- the University's hosting of the Centre for Australian Finance Institutions (CAFI), a state government funded initiative, provides it with a focus of skills in the provision of small business and banking advice at a time when many of the necessary financial and business infrastructure is being closed or removed from regional Queensland.

Collaborations

USQ offers educational, cultural, recreational, conference, consultancy and research services. It does so through its six faculties, the Distance Education Centre and specialist units such as Kumbari/Ngurpai Lag, OPACS, ContEd and Marketing and Public Relations.

It offers a diverse range of articulated award courses on-campus and off-campus, deliverable by chalk-and-talk, multimedia study packages and the Internet. It has the Australian Graduate School of Business providing executive delivery to industry leaders.

INDELTA is the business face of the University (<http://www.usq.edu.au/indelta/>), and offers its partners an extensive range of services which embrace flexible learning methodologies and information technology skills, for example:

- project management
- training needs analysis
- education/training design, development and production
- providers of training
- access to information technology infrastructure and advice
- electronic commerce
- Internet services
- Electronic publishing
- Brokerage access to skills and facilities
- Strategic planning
- Content experts
- Human resource networking
- Research and evaluation

USQ does leading edge research in agricultural engineering and in environmental biotechnology, in land use, the finance sector, in literacy and learning. Our research and development capability is expressed through:

- The National Centre for Engineering in Agriculture (NCEA), a joint venture with the Queensland Department of Primary Industries, offering R&D and contract services in mechatronics and agricultural engineering.
- Centre for Health Practice and Research
- Centre for Rural and Environmental Biotechnology
- Centre for Australian Financial Institutions (CAFI)
- Rural Accounting Advisory Service
- Astronomical observatory at Mt Kent

The University's offer to government

USQ seeks to engage in discussions at the highest possible level with the Commonwealth Government in order to draw to its attention the many skills that it wishes to make available and the ability of the University to respond in a timely and professional way to the priorities of Government. It is the University's wish to make its whole range of services and skills available to the Government and the community so that the priorities of the present administration can be met, particularly with regard to the future security and well being of regional and remote Australians.

The University stands ready to meet with representatives of the Government at any time and at any place mutually convenient. As Vice-Chancellor of the University I can demonstrate a willingness and a track record in providing a fortunate mix of academic and commercial skills to those who have clear plans for the development of our state.

It is imperative that the Committee and the Commonwealth Government are aware of and recognise the success and continuing role of Queensland's and Australia's regional universities in supplying and enhancing valuable educational and social infrastructure throughout regional Australia. With that in view, it is vital that

Government further embrace the sector through heightened policy development and an expansion of support and resources.

Submission Recommendations

As stated earlier in this submission, the University of Southern Queensland is a leading and influential educational and social institution in regional Queensland and Australia. Its ability to assist Government deliver practical outcomes will be enhanced by Government

- advancing the improvement of telecommunications infrastructure throughout rural and regional Queensland
- actively seeking information and advice from USQ and inviting it to participate in Government policy development through inclusion in taskforces and committees
- accepting USQ's standing invitation to Government leaders, Ministers and senior Government officers to make regular visits of inspection to USQ's campuses at Toowoomba and Hervey Bay
- collaborating with USQ in regionally focused research and development programs
- inviting USQ academic staff to address and make contributions to Government organised conferences and seminars
- considering USQ as a natural partner in the design and delivery of MBA's and other courses for Government employees throughout regional Australia
- pursuing the proposal by the Commonwealth and the Queensland Department of State Development to establish an Information Technology Research and Development Centre in the Wide Bay region
- providing funding for the further development of an innovative online post-graduate training package currently being produced within USQ's Arts Faculty to assist rural and regional communities overcome a critical shortage of health workers
- funding and providing support for the development of a program, to be delivered by flexible delivery mode, to improve community literacy and prepare people with literacy and numeracy deficiencies for entry into tertiary study.

This submission makes specific reference to the following Priorities:

1 More Jobs

USQ is the first choice university for students from the Darling Downs. Its reputation for teaching excellence prepares graduates for the workforce and enables them to meet employer needs.

USQ is assisting business and industry create secure and sustainable jobs through the innovative flexible delivery (ie. at distance) of professional development and post graduate courses. This is especially the case with regard to our Business and Commerce faculties.

Submission 1: Through enhanced funding and other support, and with the opportunity to demonstrate its expertise, USQ can deliver additional job and professional development training especially for regional and rural Australians. The resulting educational and skilling improvement in some of the nation's most

important rural based export centres and industries will have a multiplier effect of more jobs.

2 Building The Regions

USQ has a proud record in this regard. Its rural and regional focussed teaching programs assist in the graduation of skilled teachers, nurses, and engineers who are vocationally prepared for employment throughout regional Australia. At a time when the regions are increasingly having difficulty attracting professional people to live and work in rural and regional areas, USQ's expertise and record in this regard should be valued and attract additional financial support from Government.

USQ's quality rural focussed research and development program continues to make a valuable contribution to the building of economic development infrastructure and support of the nation's export sector and value-adding industries. This is particularly the case with regard to some of the State's major rural based export industries.

At a time when people in the regions are forthright in their demands for adequate services and educational opportunities, USQ's expertise in the delivery of flexible distance education, including the Internet, enables customers to study in their time, in their place, at their pace, and in their way. They are therefore not required to visit campus. This provides further opportunities for cheaper and more accessible higher education for people in rural and regional Australia.

Submission 2: Given USQ's central performance as a leading regional institution, increased Government support for the University makes sound economic sense. Government should regard USQ as a major economic development asset especially with regard to the attraction of industry and investment into rural and regional areas. Government should also continue to target USQ when planning and delivering programs of support for research and development to institutions of higher education.

3 Skilling the Regions

USQ is world renowned for its expertise in delivering life-long learning programs including accredited professional development courses tailored to the requirements of corporate clients. USQ's campus presence in Toowoomba and Wide Bay offers numerous opportunities for Government.

In partnership with the Government, USQ can make further contributions in skilling Australia by improving workplace skills, raising education levels, and focusing on whole of life skills. In particular, this partnership can assist government and industry achieve innovation and flexibility in the information age. This is particularly the case with regard to the imminent rise of online commerce.

Submission 3: The rise of electronic commerce offers many opportunities to regional Australia. In the global online world, location is not a priority. With the demise of the tyranny of distance, regional based business and industry may well compete for business and sales with those in the cities. USQ's position of leadership in this field is a valuable resource to Government seeking direction and collaboration. Consideration should be given to engaging USQ in the further education and training

of Government employees especially in regional and rural Australia. USQ has a demonstrated ability in tailoring MBAs etc. to suit individual department and all of Government requirements, and has the ability to deliver these at distance.

Additional information about The University of Southern Queensland and matters referred to in this submission can be found on the University's website ... (www.usq.edu.au)

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