

Chapter 1

Introduction

The inquiry

1.1 On 16 June 2009 the Senate referred the following matter to the Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee for inquiry and report.

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, with particular reference to:

- (a) the financial impact on rural and regional students who are attending metropolitan secondary schools, universities or TAFE;
- (b) the education alternatives for rural and regional students wanting to study in regional areas;
- (c) the implications of current and proposed government measures on prospective students living in rural and regional areas;
- (d) the short- and long-term impact of current and proposed government policies on regional university and TAFE college enrolments;
- (e) the adequacy of government measures to provide for students who are required to leave home for secondary or post-secondary study;
- (f) the educational needs of rural and regional students;
- (g) the impact of government measures and proposals on rural and regional communities; and
- (d) other related matters

1.2 An interim report for the inquiry was tabled on 28 August 2009, in which the committee extended the reporting date to 29 October 2009. On 27 October 2009 the reporting date was extended to 11 December 2009.

1.3 The committee advertised the inquiry in *The Australian* on 11 July 2009. The committee also advertised the inquiry in *Farm Weekly* (WA), *The Land* (NSW), *Queensland Country Life* (Queensland) and *Stock Journal* (SA) on 9 and 23 July 2009, *Tasmanian Country* (Tasmania) on 10 and 24 July 2009 and the *Northern Territory News* (NT) on 11 July 2009. The committee also wrote directly to a number of key stakeholder groups, state and federal government departments and agencies, and peak bodies inviting submissions.

1.4 The committee received 759 submissions (see Appendix 1). The committee also decided that submissions and evidence to the committee's inquiry into the Social

Security and Other Legislation Amendment (Income Support for Students) Bill 2009 will be considered as submissions and evidence to the current inquiry.

1.5 The committee held hearings in Tweed Heads on 2 September 2009, Perth on 21 and 22 September 2009, Adelaide on 23 September 2009, Albury on 24 September 2009, Townsville on 10 November 2009, Melbourne on 11 November 2009, and in Canberra on 12 November 2009.

Definitions

1.6 In this report the committee has used the term 'rural and regional' in a general sense to denote areas which are not metropolitan areas. The use of the term 'rural and regional' includes remote areas. The committee feels this is appropriate, given that it intends this report as a broad overview of the challenges facing students in rural and regional areas, and not as a definitive analysis of particular issues facing particular areas. However the committee notes that some evidence it received did use the terms 'rural', 'regional' and 'remote' which have specific definitions in terms of geography and/or population.

1.7 The committee uses 'tertiary' to denote both the university and TAFE sectors.

Scope of the inquiry

1.8 The majority of submissions to the inquiry dealt with the issue of the proposed changes to student income support, in particular the proposed changes to Youth Allowance. The committee has tabled a report on the Social Security and Other Legislation Amendment (Income Support for Students) Bill 2009, which would implement these changes.¹ The committee will not cover the issues covered in that report in any detail in this report.

1.9 Although the majority of submissions related to Youth Allowance, the committee spent considerable time during the hearings discussing the issues in relation to the broader inquiry. In particular, the committee considered:

- the barriers that secondary schools students face in accessing educational opportunities, and
- the financial and social costs that face rural and regional students in accessing tertiary education opportunities, and
- the means by which regional tertiary institutions can expand course offerings and attract greater student numbers.

1.10 Throughout this inquiry the committee has been acutely aware that education in rural and regional areas is not something that can be considered in isolation.

1 See Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Committee, *Social Security and Other Legislation Amendment (Income Support for Students) Bill 2009 [Provisions]*, October 2009.

Education, and in particular access to educational opportunities, is a key factor in establishing and maintaining sustainable and vibrant rural and regional communities.

Structure of the report

1.11 Chapter 2 of the report discusses the barriers to students in rural and regional areas accessing educational opportunities. Key issues in that discussion are the difficulties in attracting and retaining suitably qualified teachers to rural and regional areas and the importance of communities to developing and raising students' aspirations in relation to further education.

1.12 Chapter 3 of the report contains the committee's consideration of the financial and social costs of rural and regional students accessing tertiary education. The chapter has a brief overview of issues in relation to the proposed changes to Youth Allowance, and considers how the inequity in tertiary access between rural and regional, and metropolitan students can be addressed.

1.13 Chapter 4 of the report focuses on the role of tertiary institutions in regional communities. The chapter discusses the challenges that these institutions face in terms of funding course delivery and also look at options for expanding course offerings and attracting students to these institutions.

1.14 Chapter 5 of the report sets out the committee's conclusions and recommendations in relation to this inquiry.

Previous studies

1.15 Submissions and witnesses identified a number of previous studies and inquiries relevant to the committee's current inquiry. This report makes reference to the deliberations and findings of the following reports:

- Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC), *Emerging Themes: National Inquiry into Rural and Remote Education*, March 2000.
- The National Centre of Science, Information and Communications Technology and Mathematics Education for Rural and Regional Australia (SiMERR), *The SiMERR National Survey*, Prepared for the Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training, 2006.
- Naomi Godden, with The Centre for Rural Social Research and Monash University Department of Social Work, *Regional Young People and Youth Allowance: Access to Tertiary Education*, November 2007.
- Victorian Parliament Education and Training Committee, *Inquiry into the Geographical Differences in the Rate in which Victorian Students Participate in Higher Education*, July 2009.

