

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

SUBMISSION FROM EDITH COWAN UNIVERSITY

PREAMBLE

ECU is a multi-campus institution with a broad geographic reach. ECU campuses are located in Joondalup, in the fast growing outer metropolitan northern corridor of Perth, close to Perth city in Mount Lawley and in the South West of Western Australia, 200km South of Perth.

ECU's South West Campus is Western Australia's largest non-metropolitan University campus, home to some 1000 students. Providing full-degree programmes in Education, Nursing, Business, Arts and Science, the ECU presence in the South West provides a complete University experience for students from the region. ECU is deeply committed to the South West and has invested heavily in developing the necessary infrastructure to maintain a full featured campus environment.

This submission to the Senate's Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee focuses on access to, and participation in, higher education for outer metropolitan, regional and rural communities.

HIGHER EDUCATION DELIVERY IN RURAL AND REGIONAL AREAS

Issues

- Regional university operations have a range of challenges not faced by metropolitan campuses - In all but significant regional population centres, additional costs, limited international student appeal and a smaller domestic student catchment make higher education provision more expensive. The loading provided to regional university campuses has for many years been inequitably allocated and wholly inadequate.
- ECU South West has deliberately provided a more limited breadth of courses, often in national skill shortage areas including teacher education, nursing and social work. Whilst ECU has aligned its metropolitan and regional offerings and invested heavily in campus infrastructure, there may be a perception that the quality of the student learning experience is not equal to that on metropolitan campuses.
- Attracting and retaining quality academic teaching and research staff in the context of a regional campus is a challenge.
- With a smaller course profile on offer, regional communities can lose the talented young people to metropolitan campuses and may not return after graduation. This has immediate and long-term effects on local economies and the sustainability of such communities.
- Higher education provision across the regions is patchy. In some regional areas, higher education providers compete for students, while in most areas there is no presence.

Solutions

- If participation and attainment rates are to improve and if the viability of regional communities is not to be compromised, then the Federal Government must increase and re-structure subsidises for the operation of regional university campuses.
- Financial incentives must be provided for students to study at regional campuses – reduce or remove Student Contribution amounts for courses undertaken at regional campuses, in a scheme similar to the Commonwealth Government's Student Contribution "national priority" banding.
- Financial incentives to teach at regional campuses - addressing the subsidies issue will also enable universities to provide financial incentives to attract and retain academic staff to regional campuses.

- Facilities and accommodation at regional campuses – in order to maintain and improve the student experience, Government funding needs to be significantly increased for the provision of affordable student housing in regional towns and improved services and amenities on regional campuses.
- Collaborative and innovative delivery – Federal and state government support and funding for university-TAFE collaborative delivery with designated “lead providers” in defined geographical locations.
- A national framework for external/ on-line delivery, supported by regional campuses.

FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE TO REGIONAL AND RURAL STUDENTS

- Recently announced student income support changes are welcome. The Government’s equity focus is on improving participation for low socio-economic status people, rather than regional people *per se*, and therefore the Youth Allowance changes (independence eligibility through workforce participation) are a sensible way to better target low SES people.
- The proposed new Commonwealth relocation scholarship (\$4000 for first year, then \$1000 per year thereafter) for students qualifying for Youth Allowance or ABSTUDY and relocating to study is welcome. However, to improve retention the scholarship should provide similar levels of financial assistance in all years of study.

BROAD APPROACHES TO IMPROVING HIGHER EDUCATION PARTICIPATION

Issues

- Many of the educational disadvantages of regional areas also apply to outer metropolitan areas (as acknowledged in *The Review of Australian Higher Education Final Report* pp113-114). Limited local facilities, lower Year 12 completion rates and lower aspirations for higher education qualifications, all lead to lower participation in higher education.
- Regional and outer metropolitan communities have lower educational attainment rates and higher proportions of low SES and Indigenous Australians, compared with inner metropolitan areas.
- Outer metropolitan areas are experiencing population growth as new suburbs are established and populations in regional and rural areas are declining and ageing.

Solutions

- The Inquiry should consider whether regional and rural areas in different states and territories are truly comparable, for example whether regional centres in Western Australia have the same scale as those in Victoria and Queensland. More sophisticated definitions of areas (including dimensions such as population density, services and amenities (including telecommunications), distances to major centres) are required in assessing the adequacy of Government measures in particular locations.
- The Inquiry should recognise that many of the issues (and therefore solutions) of under-provision of higher education to regional areas apply equally to outer metropolitan areas (see *Review of Australian Higher Education Final Report Recommendation 18*).
- ECU considers that educational disadvantage for remote or isolated communities, while similar in nature, is on a much greater scale than that for regional communities. The Inquiry should recognise this difference when considering the adequacy of Government measures.
- Higher education participation will be supported through the coordination of all parts of the Education system in a region. To this end partnerships between School, TAFE and University sectors should be supported and funded by Federal and state governments.