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Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Committee
Parliament House
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Dear Senator Sterle

Submission to Inquiry into Rural and Regional Access to Educational Opportunities

James Cook University is pleased to make the following submission to the Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Committee Inquiry into Rural and Regional Access to Secondary and Tertiary Education Opportunities. The comments below serve to reinforce the statements made in the Universities Australia submission to the Inquiry.

Educational opportunities for regional students

Australia's university system embraces the belief that all Australians of ability should have access to their choice of university, whether that university is located in a regional or metropolitan area. A key element of this choice is promoting the availability of high quality university education within rural and regional areas.

The compelling, core issue is that Australia should ensure that high quality education is available wherever a university is found – regional or metropolitan Australia – and regionally-based and metro-based students supported in their study to enhance prospects of success. To be more plain, people in regional Australia, regional students, deserve the option of high quality education where they live and work in the same way the metropolitan students deserve it.

That is not to say that we should be advocating more campuses – but we should seek to ensure that where, over the past 50 years or more, investment has been made in regional university infrastructure and access for regional students, this should be recognized and further put to work. Indeed, this infrastructure should be strengthened because it is in those locations that we have broken through the seemingly impenetrable barrier of low levels of participation by low SES and indigenous students and realised the opportunity to focus on education and research in areas of importance to parts of regional Australia.

Access and Equity

James Cook University believes that place is critically important to the authenticity, relevance and impact of higher education and research. We work in many places and with many communities characterised as disadvantaged and with low higher education attainment rates. It is in these places that the transformative potential of higher education and applied research can be most powerfully realised, lifting the spirit, aspirations and outcomes of whole communities.

The UA submission provides current student numbers and graduate outcomes Student data from the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) which state that overall, only 1.1 per cent of people from remote areas participated in higher education in 2007, compared to a population parity level of 2.5 per cent. Many of the factors

that may have contributed to the low number of students from remote areas are mentioned in this submission. Indigenous Australians and people of low socioeconomic status are overrepresented in regional, rural and remote areas.

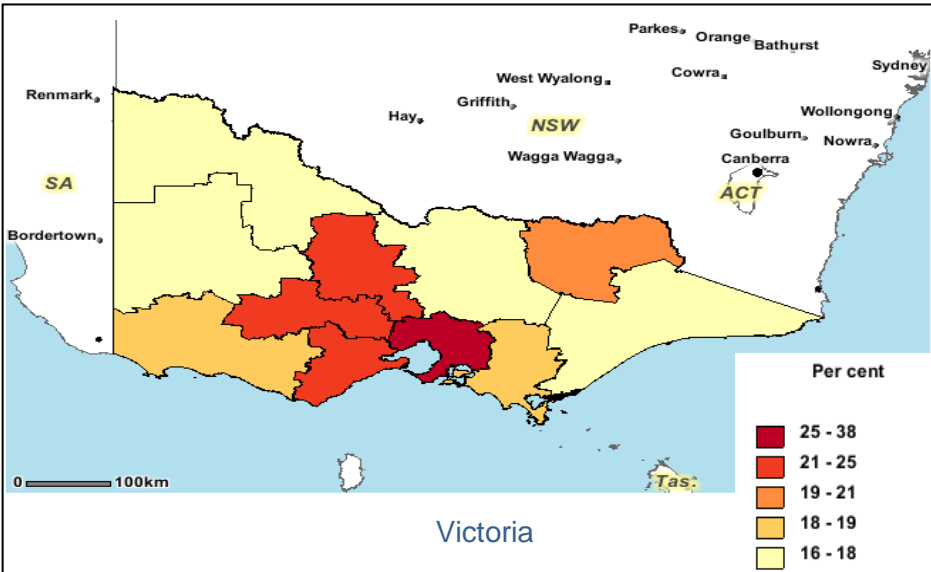
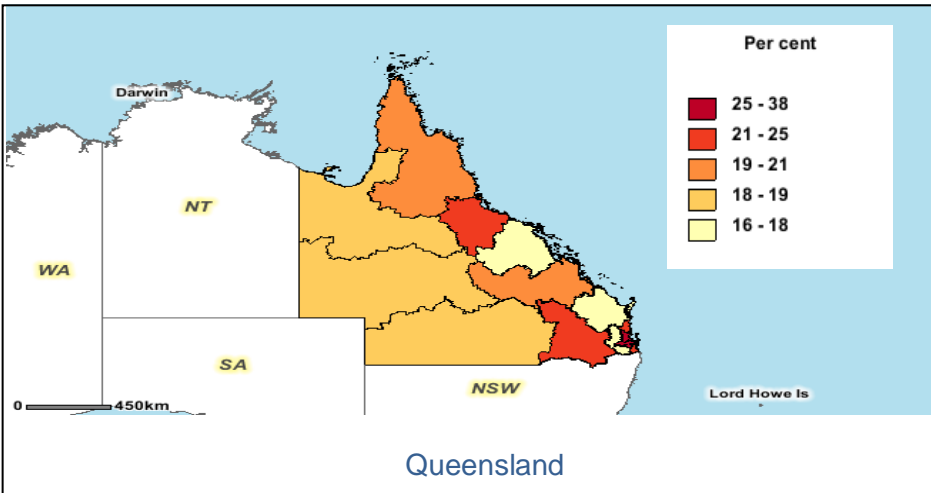
Quality educational options within regions are an important element of improving access – educational attainment is higher in those centres that do benefit from a campus and regional universities often already exceed the Government’s target of twenty per cent of enrolments coming from lower socioeconomic status students. James Cook University is an example here, as is Charles Darwin University.

Of the 11,690 domestic students studying at James Cook University in 2007:

- 23% of these were from regional areas
- 5% of these were from remote areas
- 21% were low SES students
- 3.5% were Indigenous students

The presence of a university or a university campus is correlated with increased participation in university study and higher levels of educational attainment. This is clear from ABS census data. Wherever there is a university or campus, it is plain that the proportion of the population with university qualifications is higher – and participation is greater than in surrounding rural and remote areas.

People in labour force with University qualifications 2006



Source: The Australian Bureau of Statistics' (ABS) 2006 Census

It is incorrect to expect that, all things being equal, all regional students would prefer to move to a big city university. Some prefer to stay in regional Australia to study a program of their choice. Others need to stay at home for personal or work reasons – the logic of real lives lived. Further, some city based school leavers do move to regional locations choosing to study a particular program at a particular institution; health and marine science at JCU are two examples.

Providing higher education in regions enables growth of human capital through programs that are:

- available to local populations (recognising extreme disadvantage of some regional populations)
- distinctive and high quality
- globally relevant – connecting students to the world
- informed by labour market need

Our experience has been that a high proportion of students stay in the regions having studied there, our estimate is that consistently around 65% of our medical graduates are employed in regional Australia, and half of them are in the northern Queensland region. Of the 150 students currently studying Medicine, around two thirds are from northern Queensland and the Northern Territory and about half are of rural origin. There are 20 Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander students in the program and a small number of places are available to overseas students. Around 75% of all our graduates in 2006 were employed in the region (from Mackay north and west).

Support for regional and remote students

Another vital element of promoting choice for regional students is ensuring that adequate support is available for those who need to move considerable distances from their current home to attend their preferred course and university. JCU has a high proportion of students in residences as our catchment is the entire north of Queensland. Accommodation is important across the country – especially to house students studying away from home, wherever they choose to study. In fact, we struggle to find enough accommodation for our students as there are fewer options for them in regional areas. The recent resources boom is partly to blame and there is a little relief right now, but this won't last. So the need for on-campus accommodation is arguably more critical in regional Australia.

JCU is investing heavily in on-campus accommodation, employment services, academic support, orientation guides and other means to smooth the way for incoming students – particularly those students, such as those from remote areas, for whom the university environment may initially be challenging. We have been investigating public-private partnerships for additional accommodation at Townsville and in Cairns.

The changes proposed by the Federal government to the Youth Allowance, and changes to the family assets and parental income test, will provide a higher level of income support to a greater number of students. However, there is potential for students from regional areas to be disproportionately affected by the independence criteria change, as these students often make use of the 'gap year' to establish Youth Allowance independence to help defray the substantial cost of moving to a metropolitan or regional centre to study.

Impact of Government measures on the student experience

Australian universities are committing themselves to enhance campus-based student support programs in health, child care, sporting and recreational services, counselling, and employment services, many of these in conjunction with the Student Associations, Unions or Guilds. The task of providing appropriate student services has been made more difficult by the voluntary student unionism policy, the effects of which, particularly in regional universities, have been well documented, particularly for regional campuses and their communities. Passage of the Student Services and Amenities Bill currently before Parliament to allow the introduction of a student services fee would immeasurably assist universities to offer a welcoming, safe and supportive environment to all students.

The cost of providing education in the regions

One of the 2008 Bradley Review of Australian Higher Education recommendations was the abolition of the current regional loading, however, the Government has agreed to review the regional loading to ensure it was appropriately targeted rather than abolished.

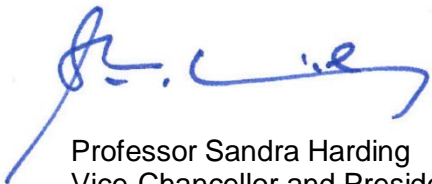
The facts are that construction, utilities, travel and other costs and services are all more expensive in regional Australia. For us, Brisbane is closer to Melbourne than it is to Cairns. In addition, smaller operations deny economy-of-scale advantages. What's more, these universities and campuses are often expected to provide infrastructure for the community – whereas in a city you might have a library, performing arts and community venues and the like that the university staff and students can use.

There is also a disparity in the provision of non-educational infrastructure. The regions need better bandwidth, not just for on-line and distance education delivery. Regional locations have slower networks – certainly JCU and Central Queensland University experience far lower speeds than Brisbane – so access on regional campus to equivalent services and bandwidth are important to securing the equivalent quality in what is offered and how it is delivered in regional Australia. As the Government moves to implement its National Broadband Network, it will be important for educational as well as other reasons that regional, rural and remote areas are not left even further behind.

It is timely that these issues are being examined. James Cook University has been playing a role in providing high quality university education for almost 50 years, and is committed to continue to play an important role for northern Queensland, northern Australia, and the tropics worldwide. We look forward to continuing to serve generations of rural, remote and metropolitan students who choose to join us.

I would be pleased to further elaborate in writing or in person any of the points made in this submission if this would be of benefit to the Inquiry.

Yours sincerely



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Vice-Chancellor and President