



The University of Southern Queensland appreciates the opportunity afforded by the Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee for inquiry to respond to its inquiry into rural and regional access to secondary and tertiary education opportunities.

The Inquiry's Terms of Reference are based on an assessment of the adequacy of Government measures to provide equitable access to secondary and postsecondary opportunities to students from rural and regional communities attending metropolitan institutions, and metropolitan students attending regional universities or technical and further education (TAFE) colleges.

Submissions have been invited, with particular reference to eight points of reference, represented by the headings below, which have been used to structure USQ's response.

Information about USQ can be accessed at: <http://www.usq.edu.au/aboutusq/default.htm>.

#### **a. Financial impact on rural and regional students who are attending metropolitan secondary schools, universities or TAFE**

It is significant that there is a strong trend for graduates from regional universities to seek, and find, employment within regional areas. Hence, the skills sets acquired by these "regionally educated" students are directly returned to regional and rural areas and so make a significant contribution to the health of regional communities. The impact of this trend when applied to a consideration of ensuring the availability of professionals – including teachers and nurses – in the regions is profound.

In this context the recent trend for professional faculties such as in Medicine and Veterinary Science to be established in regional universities is seen as extremely positive in both removing the need for high performing regional students to move to the capital cities to study towards these professions and in the implications that these moves have for the potential for professional services to be maintained in regional areas.

**RECOMMENDATION:** That measures to further enhance the provision of professional education at regional universities be considered as a basis for enhancing the accessibility of rural and regional and low SES students to professional careers and to support the maintenance of professional services in regional Australia.

## **b. Education alternatives for rural and regional students wanting to study in regional areas**

It is noted that regional post-secondary institutions, now represented by universities including The University of Southern Queensland, James Cook University, Central Queensland University, Charles Sturt University, Southern Cross University, The University of Ballarat and the regional campuses of many of the universities based in capital cities, were established specifically to improve access by regional and rural students to higher education opportunities. The pillars on which the strategy of regional campuses were based – particularly relating to lowered costs to students, providing a safe and supportive living environment, and the wider implications of an institutional Mission that includes a strong focus on service to the regions such as practically-oriented curricula and strong regional engagement – remain relevant today. It is significant that while rural and isolated students remain under-represented in the higher education sector as a whole, regional universities and campuses are significantly over-represented for these groups. In short, regional universities and campuses remain the mainstay of basic higher education provision to rural and regional students in Australia – both through on-campus and through online provision. As the government's agenda to broaden participation in higher education even further is implemented, regional provision is becoming even more important.

Factors such as low costs to students and safe living environment have positioned regional universities to attract very significant international student enrolments. These same factors are also potentially attractive to metropolitan students and this is an area that deserves serious attention. At present, there is a degree of underutilisation of regionally-based higher education infrastructure while urban campuses are frequently overcrowded. Strategies that encouraged and supported urban-based students to relocate to regional campuses to study would be associated with a range of benefits – including providing lifestyle and financial advantages to the students concerned, strengthening regional universities and regional economies – with a resultant significant impact on the well-being of regional communities - and freeing up resources on urban-based campuses.

**RECOMMENDATION:** That strategies for encouraging and supporting student mobility include a means to encourage and support urban-based students to undertake study in regional universities and campuses.

## **c. Implications of current and proposed government measures on prospective students living in rural and regional areas**

The overall package of changes impacting on students that have been proposed in the Federal Budget are generally supported. However, there is a need to address some anomalies that have become apparent to avoid discrimination of certain groups.

### **TESTS FOR INDEPENDENCE – ELIGIBILITY FOR INCOME SUPPORT**

The Federal Government has proposed changes to the tests for independence in order to qualify for higher rates of income support. The intention to introduce these changes in 2010 will catch out many students who have planned their approach to higher education study based on the old rules. For example, rural and regional students often undertake a gap year to qualify for independence as many of them would not otherwise be eligible for income support due to farm income and/or asset levels. As these students are required to relocate to study, youth allowance represents an important factor in their ability to participate in higher education while living away from home. If the new criteria come into effect in 2010 then students who have prepared for study by undertaking a gap year in 2009 to qualify under the old rules will be caught out.

**RECOMMENDATION:** Push back the start date of the new eligibility criteria pertaining to hours worked until 2011. Alternatively, provide “one year’s grace” for students who have deferred their studies for one year to work in order to access the independence test – that is, assess this cohort under the old/existing rules for 2010.

It would also be worthwhile to introduce more flexibility within the independence test to accommodate individual circumstances; for example, counting unemployment benefits or making other adjustments to allow for the lowered work opportunities available in regional communities.

## **SCHOLARSHIPS**

The Federal Government has proposed the introduction of Start-Up Scholarships and Relocation Scholarships for students on student income payments. This initiative is a positive one. However there are many other students who, under the current regime, would be eligible for comparative payments yet do not receive student income payments - including students on the Disability Support Pension or those on Parenting Payment Single. This serves as a disincentive to study for these already disadvantaged groups.

**RECOMMENDATION:** Extend Start-Up Scholarships and Relocation Scholarships to university students who are in receipt of the Disability Support Pension, Parenting Payment Single or Carer’s Pension.

It is also noted that universities need to receive guidelines on the new scholarships regime as soon as possible to allow the necessary changes to scholarships administration to be implemented.

## **EXEMPTION OF EQUITY AND MERIT BASED SCHOLARSHIPS FROM INCOME ASSESSMENT**

The Federal Government has proposed that equity and merit based scholarships be exempt from income assessments when assessing eligibility for student income support payments.

Previously, the only scholarships exempt for student income assessment were Commonwealth-based scholarships and all other scholarships were treated as income thereby affecting payments for students received by Centrelink. Under the new proposal, this measure applies to students seeking Austudy, Abstudy, Youth Allowance, and Disability Support Pension. Students in receipt of Carer’s Payment and Parenting Payment Single are also recipients of university scholarships who are affected by the income assessments.

**RECOMMENDATION:** Extend the exemption of equity and merit based scholarships from income assessment to Parenting Payment Single and Carer’s Payment.

### **d. Short- and long-term impact of current and proposed government policies on regional university and TAFE college enrolments**

Refer to response to terms of reference ‘f’ below.

### **e. Adequacy of government measures to provide for students who are required to leave home for secondary or post-secondary study**

Refer to response to terms of reference ‘c’ above.

## **f. Educational needs of rural and regional students**

### **UNIVERSITY PREPARATORY/BRIDGING/ENABLING PROGRAMS**

Rural and regional students often present to higher education as 'students at risk' – being over-represented for low SES and 'first in family' to attend university, and with high rates of educational disadvantage and financial disadvantage. Some 55% of USQ's student body are from rural and geographically isolated backgrounds and the University has played a major role over its 40 year history in broadening higher education participation to encompass non-traditional student groups such as rural and regional students.

An important strategy for achieving this broadening of participation has been the University's Tertiary Preparation Program – a pre-enrolment teaching program that serves as an entry point to all USQ degree programs. The program has attracted high enrolments (typically over 500 students per annum) for some 20 years and is, in effect, USQ's largest equity initiative as it provides an access pathway for students who would otherwise struggle to access higher education.

With the government's agenda to broaden the proportion of 18-35 year olds with a degree qualification from 32% - 40% by 2020, the importance of preparatory programs such as TPP can only grow. In providing a bridge to higher education study for students who lack traditional entry requirements and have a poor knowledge and understanding of universities, they are an essential strategy for the Bradley targets to be met.

It is of vital importance that these preparatory/bridging programs are offered by universities. Alternative programs, as may be available through TAFE or private providers, do not provide the engagement with the university culture, processes and conventions that are so crucial for non-traditional students to access and successfully participate in higher education. Universities are also best placed to offer the specialist enabling programs that are essential to entry by disadvantaged groups – including low SES, rural/isolated and Indigenous students – into the Sciences or Humanities, or into specific professional programs such as Law, Medicine or Veterinary Science.

The Commonwealth has a long-standing 'enabling' arrangement that allows students studying in university preparatory/bridging programs a fully funded HECS-free place. This simple cost-effective strategy has been highly effective in encouraging students from disadvantaged backgrounds to take the first important step of approaching higher education study and positioned them for future success in their studies.

**RECOMMENDATION:** That the Commonwealth's existing provision for support enabling study into university be maintained and, where possible, enhanced as a key strategy for supporting the widening participation agenda and the achievement of the Bradley targets.

## **g. Impact of government measures and proposals on rural and regional communities**

### **Context**

- Australia needs to have a regional population base which provides a comparable quality of life to those living in the city. Education has a critical place to play in a regional areas quality of life. It is not just about work but also about self identity, confidence, skills and knowledge.
- Government needs to assist regional Australia with local support by providing suitable education opportunities. Regional universities are able to provide appropriate mechanisms to facilitate the changes to the quality of life necessary for local and regional populations.
- Education and research jointly contribute to enhanced regional development through funding and employment opportunities.
- Local communities develop as a result and interact with educational bodies to improve opportunities in the local area

### **Key Elements**

#### **1. Australian environment**

The predominant industries in rural and regional Australia are mining and agriculture. The knowledge economy does not extend to the same extent as the urban areas. Policies that encourage the movement and maintenance of knowledge-based industries into regional areas would serve to enhance regional development and broaden opportunities for local employment. Regional education providers have a major role to play in this area through building the local skills and knowledge base needed to support these industries.

#### **2. Empowering local educational institutions to respond to local needs and conditions**

The current divide of our education system between state and federal jurisdictions may not always work in the best interests of local communities. Regional TAFE colleges run by States are not as autonomous as regional universities so they are unable to respond to local needs as quickly as may be needed.

**RECOMMENDATION:** Policies to empower TAFE institutions to act and respond to local needs should be considered as a basis for enabling them to better support local communities.

#### **3. Students**

Students are increasingly seeking to enhance their qualifications and skills by using cross-institutional enrolments as a basis for extending the range of courses available to them and undertaking a combination of university and TAFE qualifications. Previous government policies have tended to encourage competition between institutions which worked against collaboration within and between sectors to find the best educational pathways for each student.

**RECOMMENDATION:** Strategies to encourage collaborative program development, articulation arrangements and other joint initiatives between tertiary institutions to improve educational opportunities for students should be considered. It is noted, for example, that the HESA Act does not allow for co-badging of awards between universities. This significant failing needs to be addressed.

#### 4. Student Mobility

It has long been appreciated that the level of student mobility so evident in the US tertiary education system is lacking in Australia, and that this has implications for the educational opportunities available to students and the efficient and effective utilisation of available educational infrastructure. Strategies for encouraging and supporting student mobility need to be developed – see the Recommendation under terms of reference ‘b’ above.

#### **h. Other related matters**

A recent ‘Tour’ of south-west Queensland by a senior delegation of USQ Council and management was undertaken to identify strategies for the University to improve its engagement with and service to its regional Queensland constituency. Outcomes from that exercise are instructive of what behaviours government policy needs to support and encourage in order to provide improved educational opportunities for rural and regional students.

Outcomes of the Tour included:

- A reinforcement of the need for universities to improve their involvement with regional TAFE institutes and schools; not only in terms of ensuring sound articulation pathways but in undertaking partnership activities in the collaborative development and delivery of programs, in securing staff and student exchanges and in sharing resources.
- Meaningful and sustained engagement by the University in regional areas and the forging of strong local partnerships and networks are critical for both supporting regional development and for forging positive attitudes towards tertiary study.
- Early schools outreach programs – including at the level of middle-to-late primary school – are essential for influencing the development of positive and informed attitudes to post-secondary study.
- Multiple educational pathways are needed to allow for individual circumstances and local conditions, including wide access to university bridging programs.
- An emphasis needs to be given to ‘professional retraining’ – access to postgraduate opportunities for updating skills and knowledge, adapting to changing needs in the workforce and enabling career change. There is a strong desire by regionally-based professionals to stay in the regions while they are progressing their qualifications – the provision of online programs is ideal for this purpose.
- Enormous potential exists to improve the local provision of higher education across regional Australia by supplementing online provision by local support employing an “i-hub and spokes” approach, employing i-labs based in local facilities – TAFE, schools, libraries, etc.
- The potential for knowledge-based industries to grow and provide employment in regional centres needs to be realised. The education sectors are positioned to support these developments through building local skills and interest in disciplines that extend beyond traditional agriculture and mining interests.

Professor Graham Baker  
Acting Vice Chancellor  
The University of Southern Queensland,  
Toowoomba, Queensland 4350, AUSTRALIA.