

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

Highlands Local Learning and Employment Network (HLLLEN) Submission

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Background

The participation rates of young Australians in post compulsory education has been of concern to successive governments at both a state and federal level for well over 20 years. In 1988 a study undertaken in Victoria by the Country Education Project entitled "Three Times Less Likely"(1) highlighted the fact that in Victoria students from rural areas (defined as anywhere that is not urban) were severely disadvantaged in their post secondary education participation. As the title suggests, the paper identified that rural students are three times less likely to participate in post secondary education than their metropolitan counterparts. Several factors contributing to this lack of participation were identified amongst them where "the financial costs involved."

20 years on, the same issues are still of concern as highlighted in the recently released paper "Inquiry into Geographical Differences in the Rate in which Victorian Students Participate in Higher Education."(2) This Inquiry by the Victorian Education and Training Committee identified that *'Higher Education generates important benefits for both individuals and society. To students university study offers an avenue for personal growth and fulfillment, while imparting knowledge and skills that open doors for life opportunities. At the same time, the higher education system produces skilled graduates who are vital to local and national economies and to civil society. It is therefore important that individuals have opportunities to participate in quality higher education, irrespective of their background or home location'*

During the inquiry the Committee heard about the difficulties facing many school leavers from rural and regional areas who were forced to leave home in order to study. The high cost of university study, particularly when living away from home was identified as being responsible for the disproportionately high university deferment rates amongst this cohort.

(1) Victorian Country Education Project (1988) "Three Times Less Likely", Victorian Government

(2) Education and training Committee (2009) Inquiry into Geographical Differences in the Rate in which Victorian Students Participate in Higher Education

In 2008 the Victorian Government published “The Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development”. (3) This framework highlights the importance of “affording every child every opportunity to succeed in education, regardless of their location or socio economic circumstances”.

At a Federal level the need to increase participation in education has, and continues to be, on the agenda.’ *National policy statements for every sector of education and training in Australia emphasise the need to increase participation in education and training through lifelong learning. A key policy implication of lifelong learning is the need to support seamlessness in education and training provision*. (4)

Australia’s current government has identified that *“the up skilling of the Australian workforce is a key priority for its first term of office and indicated that this is pivotal to its overall economic policy.”*(5)

Both the educational and economic landscape has undergone huge change in the past 20 years. Education is now a global business, enormous technological advances have occurred and Australia is faced with an ageing population and a diminishing workforce. We now consider Australia’s economic outlook in the context of the global economy and successive state and federal governments have paid increasing attention to education as being the means to ensure Australia remains a viable player in this global economy.

However, for many students from rural and regional backgrounds participation in post compulsory education, the concept of lifelong learning and the right to succeed in education means little when faced with the realities of attempting to do so.

Terms of Reference

The cost of supporting a child to live away from home to study can be as high as \$20,000.00 a year. (6) The cost of enrolment and books are an added expense. For many families living in rural and regional areas this cost is prohibitive, but continuing to live at home and study is, in most cases not an option. These financial burdens have an obvious consequence; in 2007-08 nearly 14% of school leavers in non-metropolitan areas rejected their university offer. This compares to a rejection rate of 8.6% in metropolitan areas. (2)

One in three school leavers from non-metropolitan areas who received a university offer deferred their studies. In comparison, the deferment rate amongst metropolitan students was 10.1%. (2) Many young people from regional and rural areas defer their studies, take a gap year and work. They work in order to save toward their future studies and to gain access to the youth Allowance at an independent rate.

(3) Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (September 2008) “Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development”

(4) Chapman,B, Doughney,L, Watson, L (2002) “Financing Cross-Sectoral Education and Training in Australia: Some Issues” Paper prepared for the 9th Annual Vocational Education and Training Research (AVETRA) Conference, Coffs Harbour.

(5) Department of Innovation Industry and Regional Development (DIIRD), 2008, Skills Victoria

(6) Godden.N. (2007) Regional Young People and Youth Allowance: Access to Tertiary Education

Enrolment at an institute to undertake VET studies can provide a less costly educational pathway for school leavers. Yet, *“findings from the On Track survey of 2007 Victorian school leavers showed that in most metropolitan regions with lower transition rates to university, relatively high movement into upper and entry level VET meant a reasonably high overall rate of transition to tertiary education. In contrast, non metropolitan regions had relatively low levels of transition to upper and entry level VET among school leavers, compounding lower levels of transition to higher education.”*(2)

Irrespective of the current economic slowdown and increasing unemployment research indicates that Australia will have to contend with a massive shortfall of workers with the required vocational qualifications for the future. *“The best estimate is that if the supply of people with VET qualifications remains at the same level as in 2005, a shortfall of 240,000 can be expected over the next 10 years.”* (5)

Australia must continue to build a knowledge economy in order to participate effectively in a global economy. It is not appropriate to ‘exclude’ young people from rural and regional areas from contributing to the future economic viability of Australia and as importantly, a rich and rewarding life for themselves.

Regional Victoria can provide for the educational aspirations of many young people, with regional campuses of many metropolitan universities, an excellent regional university in Ballarat, many regional TAFE institutes and private training providers. However, these options do not cater for all young people. Rural and regional areas cannot provide the critical mass required to ensure the viability of institutions offering a wide array of courses. Education providers must, like all businesses cater to the masses and rationalise their offerings. Consequently, many young people must move away from home in order to pursue their study and career aspirations.

However, anecdotal evidence indicates that many young people who are forced to move away to study will often return to their childhood communities or other regional areas upon completion of their studies. This will assist to alleviate the appalling shortage of professionals and paraprofessionals in rural and regional areas, address access and equity issues with regard to services in these areas and potentially assist to economically invigorate many small communities.

In 1994, the National Board of Employment Education and Training wrote in a report to government; *“As a matter of urgency, the Commonwealth, in close consultation with the States – review the current financial assistance schemes and develop new guidelines specifically for financial assistance for rural/regional students undertaking tertiary education”.*(7)

(7) National Board of Education Training and Employment (1994) “Provision of Post Compulsory Education and Training in Non-Metropolitan Australia”

In 2000 the Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission released a report into education in rural and remote Australia, concluding that country children suffered “*substantial disadvantage*” that amounted to “*discrimination*”. (8) Yet, 9 years later little has changed!

The proposed changes to the eligibility criteria for the Independent Youth Allowance will not assist to address the disadvantage already faced by rural and regional young people wishing to pursue post compulsory education. In fact, it will create further disadvantage and additional barriers.

These proposed changes will require that young people undertake a minimum of 30 hrs of work per week for a minimum of 18 months in order to qualify for the Independent Youth Allowance. In rural and regional areas employment opportunities are generally limited and as a result of several years of drought and the GFC are, in many areas, now virtually non-existent. However, for many young people access to the Independent Youth Allowance affords them the only real opportunity they have to continue study post secondary school.

For those fortunate enough to secure this amount of work: how many will be able to commence their course midyear? Many courses have pre-requisite units that are offered in first semester, not second semester. In relation to deferment, a university place is generally deferred for a period of 12 months. After a period of 18 months in the workforce will their university place be available? If they must wait to commence their course until the beginning of their second year post secondary school will they still be motivated to do so?

The changes that are proposed will be retrospective. So, all young people that are currently in a gap year and who have not been working a minimum of 30 hrs per week will be required to review their plans and if fortunate enough to gain an adequate amount of work across the next two years may be in a position to commence their studies in 2012. These young people made decisions regarding their future based on information that was available to them at the time. A change in the rules of the game is neither fair nor reasonable mid way through the game.

These changes will also mean less money for accommodation for regional and remote students. Commonwealth Accommodation Scholarships that currently provide \$4415 per annum for up to four years for eligible country based students will be replaced by a Relocation Allowance, which provides \$4000 for the first year but only \$1000 per year thereafter.

Data clearly demonstrates the poor uptake of post compulsory study by young people in rural and regional areas. These proposed changes will not assist in increasing the participation of rural and regional young people in post compulsory education. For the benefit of young rural and regional people, for the prosperity of their communities and the economic competitiveness of Australia it is critical that we both encourage and support their future educational and career aspirations.

(8) Chris Sidoti, (24 February, 2000) “Beyond Bush Talks,” Outback and Australian Association of Rural Nurses Conferences, Toowoomba, Qld,

Recommendations

1. Abolish the retrospective nature of these changes. Develop interim provisions for young people currently in a gap year in order to ensure that they are not disadvantaged by decisions made in 2008 based on information that was current at that time.
2. Ideally, review and re-define “independence” in the context of the Youth Allowance. Acknowledge that young people that are living away from home to study are independent. Alternatively, review the means test exemptions for regional students.
3. Provide additional financial support for young people from rural and regional areas that are forced to relocate for their study. At a minimum the relocation scholarship should be consistent across all years of study, not reduced in second and subsequent years.
4. Investigate options for increasing participation in post compulsory education for rural and regional young people. Address the access and equity issues faced by rural and regional young people. Consider scholarships for rural and regional students studying in skills shortage areas. Investment in infrastructure to support distance / e-learning. Marketing campaign (to rural and regional families) highlighting the future impacts for young people of not pursuing tertiary education. This may assist to address the culture in many rural / regional communities where education is not highly valued.

Case study

1. Sally*completed Year 12 in 2008. She deferred her place at Latrobe University (Bachelor of Archaeology) and decided to take a gap year in order to qualify for the Youth Study Allowance scheme. Like most of her friends at school, Sally knew her parents could not afford to pay for her accommodation in Melbourne while she studied, so she planned to earn enough in her gap year to qualify her for this Allowance. She was on track to meet the criteria when the proposed changes to the scheme were announced.

Like most regional centres, Ballarat has a high unemployment and underemployment rate and the changes to the eligibility criteria for the Allowance now make it impossible for Sally to qualify.

Sally feels she is left with two options. She could move to Melbourne in 2010 as planned and work full-time while studying full-time and paying for her own accommodation. If she could find full-time work she would qualify for the Youth Allowance mid-way through her course, but the first eighteen months would be very difficult. The other option is she abandons her dream of becoming an archeologist and studies at a university in Ballarat while living at home with her parents. This would make studying easier for Sally, but the course options in Ballarat are limited and nothing appeals to her.

She feels quite despondent about her future and has considered giving up the idea of university altogether.

** Name changed for privacy reasons*