

Submission to Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee.

This submission relates to the Committee's inquiry into Rural and Regional Access to Secondary and Tertiary Education Opportunities for students from regional communities.

*Background.*

I am a mature age (55) student living on King Island, Tasmania and enrolled at Charles Sturt University (CSU) in a Bachelor of Agricultural Business Management. I am studying by distance education and have been enrolled for four semesters. In 1974 I completed a Bachelor of Commerce by studying fulltime at University of Queensland and in 1990, after working professionally in Australia and overseas, established an accountancy and tax business on King Island which employs three people.

King Island, located midway between Victoria and Tasmania, in the middle of Bass Strait is the home of approximately 1500 people. Our major industries are production of beef, cheese and kelp dust. All major employers are overseas owned – JBS Swift, National Foods and FMC Corp Inc. These companies evidence little concern for the region or its residents and are focussed solely on return of investment. Consequently, the long term survival of our area, both as a community and environmentally, depends heavily on the personal and economic investment of our individual residents and businesses and their ability to maintain up to date, efficient and sustainable business practices. Access to equitable secondary and tertiary level education is a central requirement for such an achievement.

My husband and I also operate a beef rearing property on the island, and it is to obtain more relevant information and experience to maintain this business in an economically and environmentally sustainable manner that I am enrolled in these university studies.

I would like the Committee to consider the following points in relation to **distance education** students studying at metropolitan or regional universities-

*1. Financial Impact.*

The HELP system covering the university fees themselves is of immense benefit. Whilst these are recouped from the tax paid during the year, the ability to enrol in a subject without full payment immediately is an advantage when the receipt of income during the year is volatile, as is the case for many primary producers.

Financial disadvantages faced by distance education versus campus enrolled students include:-

- a) Many subjects have a compulsory residential school during the semester. My travel and accommodation costs for attendance at the Orange campus average \$2,000. This is more than the subject fee cost. Other students attending the Orange residential school came from Adelaide, Perth and Melbourne and would have similar or higher costs.

This means that for a 24 subject course in which a third of the subjects have compulsory residential schools as much as \$16,000 can be added to the cost of a course for regional students studying by distance education.

- b) Minor financial imposts are caused by the need for access to books and the internet. Whilst the internet would probably be used by campus based students, return fees for library books probably add \$200 a year to study costs for distance students.

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

I study as a distance education student because it was not possible for me to leave full time employment/business. The Charles Sturt University was the **only** tertiary institution offering distance education of agricultural business subjects. During the course of study I have become disenchanted with the level of electronic/internet support by CSU, but despite diligent research have been unable to find an alternative.

## *3. Other related matters.*

From my experience, there are two vital services for distance education students which are substandard and adversely impact equitable access to education alternatives:-

### **A commitment to service students with electronic and internet information.**

When I queried one lecturer as to why the extremely relevant residential school field based lecture could not be provided on CD he advised the video services area had been closed by CSU due to cost. This was borne out by recommended readings in one subject being provided by the library on VHS tape. The content of the tapes were CSU copyright and had been produced some 10 years previously by the video services area. No updating of the material eg to CD, had been carried out since, despite the lectures being listed as recommended reading for current students.

The HELP fees for a distance education student, which are the same as for a full time campus based student, in my case provide a paper based lecture guide, sometimes not updated for several years, and the marking of approximately three assignments per subject often with no exam requirement. This is a substantial difference to a weekly lecture regime and physical access to lecturers available to a campus based student for the same subject fee cost.

It is suggested that a requirement of future government funding be:-

- I. that all tertiary theory courses be made available to distance education students. This would mean that there is competition between institutions so good quality alternatives are available to all students.
- II. That these courses be delivered via electronic/internet means to a level equivalent with day students. In practice this could mean that day lectures are captured electronically and made available by internet means to distance students.

An advantage to distance education students is that the use of assignments during the semester allows them to juggle study, work and family commitments. The daily lectures can be accessed at their preferred timing.

**If distance education of a competitive and campus comparable level could be made available to rural and regional students there would be a substantially decreased need for them to leave their regional areas to study, or to do without the benefit of further education.**

#### **Availability of reliable internet services.**

**It cannot be too heavily emphasised the disadvantage suffered by distance education students because of the lack of reliable internet services. The service is a disgrace.**

A high reliance is placed on a tertiary student's ability to undertake research in areas being studied. This means that electronic journals and publications, Australian and overseas websites need to be accessed and interrogated. Consequently, it is possible to be on the internet for some hours. It is normal for any of my internet sessions to be interrupted and need to be re-established three or four times because of signal strength variations from very good to very low on a continuing basis. Telstra acknowledge the problem **but it persists**.

I am advised that the time to lodge an assignment electronically takes a campus based student approximately five minutes. It has taken me up to an hour and a half to successfully lodge a large assignment through the same system because of internet signal drop outs and time outs.

**The government appears to be unable to ensure the provision of equitable access for rural students to the same internet services provided to metropolitan students.**

It is suggested that Telstra be made to provide a free satellite internet service, both access and usage, to all secondary and tertiary distance education students for the term of their studies. Although unlikely, perhaps an economic incentive will provide some emphasis for an improvement in internet services for rural communities.

#### **Conclusion**

In an increasingly technology based society, the need for any student to physically attend an educational institution should be substantially decreased. Achieving this will mean, for rural students, a more equitable access to higher level education without the need to sever family and community ties. As well, increased skill levels and hopefully increased business and employment opportunities will flow to the communities in which the students still reside.

However this will only occur if the emphasis of the institutions, both educational and governmental, is to service students regardless of their locale rather than increasing the emphasis on bricks and mortar infrastructure.

The current apparently insurmountable hurdle to achieving this improvement is the continued lack of internet access in rural areas. Every year which goes by disadvantages thousands of rural Australians, many of whom will not achieve increased educational goals. A five to ten year time frame on improving this situation is unacceptable.

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