

6th August 2009

Ms Jeanette Radcliffe
Committee Secretary
Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Ms Radcliffe,

The Western Australian Farmers Federation (Inc) (WAFarmers) thanks you for the opportunity to forward a submission to the Inquiry into Rural and Regional Access to Secondary and Tertiary Education Opportunities.

As background, the Western Australian Farmers Federation (Inc) (WAFarmers) is the State's largest and most influential rural lobby and service organisation. WAFarmers represents approximately 4,000 Western Australian farmers from a range of primary industries including grain growers, meat and wool producers, horticulturalists, dairy farmers, commercial egg producers and beekeepers. Collectively our members are major contributors to the \$5.5 billion gross value of production that agriculture in its various forms contributes annually to Western Australia's economy. Additionally, through differing forms of land tenure, our members own, control and capably manage many millions of hectares of the State's land mass and as such are responsible for maintaining the productive capacity and environmental well being of that land.

WAFarmers position on this issue is that all students, whether based in rural, remote or metropolitan areas should have equity in accessing secondary and tertiary educational opportunities.

The 2008 Federal Government Review of Higher Education (the Bradley Report) outlined the difficulties faced by rural and remotely based students. It found that *"We also face difficulties with provision of higher education in regional areas where there are thin markets which will not sustain a viable higher education presence. These problems will be exacerbated by projections of further decreases in the 15- to 24-year age group in many regional areas. Current arrangements provide no clear incentives to set up education programs in areas of need nor to work collaboratively with other providers to address problems of provision, and they mask signals that provision in some areas may need review. It is in regional areas that some of the difficulties, blockages and inefficiencies which derive from the structures of tertiary provision in our federal system are most evident."*

Further, on students from regional and remote areas, the report found *"People from regional and remote parts of Australia remain seriously under- represented in higher education and the participation rates for both have worsened in the last five years. Retention of the regional group has also been decreasing relative to urban students and retention rates are now 3 per cent below the rates of the remainder of the student population. The success and retention patterns for remote students are of much greater concern. The indicator levels are very low compared with their non-remote peers. For example, success rates are currently 9 per cent below and retention is 13 per cent below the rates of other students."*

The Bradley Report clearly identifies that rural and remote students have limited options to remain in their community to continue their education. As such WAFarmers seeks to ensure that students who have attained the appropriate marks can attend secondary and tertiary studies that are centred outside of their communities. This involves challenges not faced by metropolitan based students, and includes financial costs, in relocation and the ongoing cost of living expenses and social costs, in the disconnection with the traditional support network of the family unit. These are costs, not borne by metropolitan based students who have the advantage of being able to remain in their home whilst studying. It is these types of issue which contribute to the low levels of enrolment and completion identified by Bradley.

A recent example of the type of policy shift which has broad reaching implications was the 2009 Federal Budget, which delivered disappointing news for rural and remote students. The decision to change the current Youth Allowance Scheme will disadvantage students from regional and remote areas, in that to qualify, an applicant must have worked a minimum of 30 hours per week, for at least 18 months over a two year period.

The proposed changes appear to be against the recommendations of the Bradley Report. Further, it highlights another challenge faced by rural and remote students, which can be explained by a comparison of the different levels of financial support offered to apprentices and students. Apprentices who move from country areas are able to earn a wage whilst accessing a living away from home allowance, whilst students in the same position do not get the allowance and attract a large student-debt. Clearly one is a far more attractive proposition than the other. The proposed changes will increase the difficulties that rural students face in continuing with higher education.

WAFarmers believes that rather than reducing support, that extra assistance should be made available for rural and remote students due to the costs incurred by families for accommodating students away from home, and for the distances that students often have to travel to get to and from their place of schooling. This is of particular importance in a very large State such as Western Australia.

On agricultural-specific education, it is widely recognised that a high percentage of students who study agriculture-related professions have an agricultural background. Thus limiting the opportunity for rural and remote students to study will impact on the future services available to the agricultural industry. This review occurs at a critical time for agriculture. In April 2009, the Federal Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, Tony Burke announced its Primary Industries Education Foundation, commenting that "a vibrant and sustainable agricultural sector is key to the future prosperity of Australia and the world" noting that "Working in agriculture goes beyond being on the land - we also need scientists, agricultural economists and environmental professionals.

WAFarmers therefore has difficulty in reconciling these comments with the Federal Budget initiative.

A reduction in financial support to rural and remote students also has far reaching social implications. Curtin University, one of two Western Australian universities to offer agriculture-based courses recently announced that it is reviewing the future of its Northam campus, and a move to relocated current courses to Perth as early as 2011. Loss of the Northam campus, which has on-site accommodation has two impacts it lowers the total pool of places available to students, and it means that agricultural related courses are only available to students who are prepared to, and can afford to move to Perth to do so. Thus the vicious cycle is made worse as opportunities decrease, whilst those that remain become more expensive.

WAFarmers understands that the Inquiry's Terms of Reference are far wider than the issues raised in this submission and therefore we request that the committee consider the issues we have listed and apply these broadly to ensure that rural and regional students are not adversely impacted by future policy but rather are provided with the support needed to assist them in overcoming the considerable difficulties which were highlighted in the Bradley Report.

I thank you for consideration of this submission. Should you wish to discuss this matter please do not hesitate to contact me on 0427 183 439 or WAFarmers Director of Policy, Alan Hill on 9486 2100.

Yours sincerely



Mike Norton
President