

## Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee

### Rural and regional access to secondary and tertiary education

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The University of Tasmania welcomes the Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee's inquiry into the adequacy of current government strategies to provide equitable rural and regional access to secondary and higher education options, and appreciates the opportunity to comment on this important issue.

The University makes this submission jointly with the Tasmanian Academy, which is the organisations established by the Tasmanian Government in its post-Year 10 reforms to deliver statewide programs for students in Years 11 and 12 who are embarking on an academic pathway.

Both organisations would welcome the opportunity at a later date to provide verbal evidence to your Committee, and answer questions about the unique challenges facing senior secondary and tertiary students in Tasmania.

**The financial impact on rural and regional students who are attending metropolitan secondary schools, universities and TAFE; and  
The adequacy of government measures to provide for students who are required to leave home for secondary or post-secondary study**

The principal financial impact on rural and regional students attending metropolitan senior secondary and tertiary education institutions is in the physical relocation which must be undertaken, and in the associated living away from home costs. These costs can be substantial, with annual living costs for a student living away from home conservatively estimated at \$20,000 pa. The costs attached to relocation are also quite high, and there are also additional expenses arising as a result of students returning home at weekends and during semester breaks. The adequacy of Commonwealth support has to be considered in the context of these costs – and by any assessment, Commonwealth support can only be seen as a relatively small (though welcome) contribution to addressing the financial impacts on rural and regional students.

Whilst the new Commonwealth support arrangements are likely to be delivered more efficiently through Centrelink in conjunction with other income support payments, there is a sense in which these provisions only deal with very low income earners. There are many families on incomes only marginally above the new thresholds that will still be unable to meet the costs of supporting students to live away from home whilst studying. This also

applies to many families and students living in outer metropolitan areas who face similar difficulties in accessing higher education.

There are many valid concerns in relation to the current parameters for provision of student support which will, no doubt, be raised in other submissions and by particular interest groups, and which will be addressed within the Government's overall budget priorities. But Government support to students will only ever provide a partial solution. Instead, some of the financial impacts on rural and regional students need to be addressed by educational institutions and the broader community.

### **Government Targets and Funding**

The Government's target setting in relation to increased access and participation is a very positive signal:

- at least 40 per cent of 25 to 34 year olds having attained a qualification at bachelor level within the next 15 years; and
- 20 per cent of higher education enrolments at undergraduate level being people from low socio-economic status backgrounds.

The incentives to be provided to universities to achieve these targets:

- funding for structural reform to support greater participation, change to campus locations, collaborative ventures with other education providers to increase access to higher education opportunities; and
- demand-driven funding of enrolment growth

are much more likely to be effective in encouraging creative responses to the issues faced by rural and regional communities alongside the direct contributions to student support.

### **Social, cultural and structural reforms**

Major social, cultural and structural reforms are required to achieve the Government's targets.

Some regions such as the North-West region of Tasmania have among the lowest levels of educational participation in Australia. UTAS enrolments (2007 data) include an access rate of 32% for low socio-economic status (national average 15.9%) and 41% for regional (rural) status (national average 19%).

The economic benefits of increasing educational attainment are clear – if the average educational attainment of the working-age population were to rise by a year, real GDP should rise by eight percent<sup>1</sup>. These economic impacts of increasing educational attainment

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<sup>1</sup> Dowrick, Steve (2002). 'The Contribution of Innovation and Education to Economic Growth.' Melbourne Institute Economic and Social Outlook Conference (April).

need to be strongly promoted so that government, business, industry and the whole community become more engaged in increasing participation rates.

Educational institutions and universities also recognise that there are other barriers to higher education participation.

A major problem in rural and regional areas is the lack of family history of higher education, and it is important that we find new ways of encouraging these aspirations in regional communities. Indeed, the Commonwealth Government is changing the definition of lower socio-economic status so that it will be based on parental education background – and this highlights the strong correlation between educational attainment and socio-economic status.

Support for the ongoing development of quality teachers and mentors is critical to the delivery of secondary education and in developing, encouraging and supporting higher education aspirations in regional communities.

Support is also required for delivery of senior secondary education to young people living in small rural communities through flexible learning, teacher outreach and learning and development support for local teachers to give young rural students the opportunity to learn ‘in place’ for as long as feasible before moving to an urban centre.

<p><b>The education alternatives for rural and regional students wanting to study in regional areas; and</b> <b>The educational needs of rural and regional students</b></p>
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There are significant social and economic reasons to provide greater access to higher education for regional communities; and to allow students to maintain their connection with their communities even if they live away from home to study. This can be achieved through providing better transitional pathways to higher education and by actively seeking to provide opportunities for community connections throughout undergraduate degree programs.

Community connections can be encouraged by ensuring students who have practicum, clinical or work placements as part of their study are given the opportunity to undertake these in their home community; by incorporating more work- and project-based learning into a broader range of awards so that students have the opportunity to undertake these tasks in regional and rural areas; and by developing more programs that focus on the generic skills required in regional communities. This, in turn, would support the retention of graduating students within the community.

Many rural areas experience shortages of health care workers including, among others, doctors, dentists, nurses, pharmacists and allied health professionals. There needs to be strong alignment in funding across a range of agencies to achieve integrated support for regional communities. In particular, Health funding for the support of clinical placements needs to be aligned with, and support, university plans for development of health programs in regional areas.

## Claremont College Project

The UTAS experience is that it takes time, effort and funding to build a critical mass of students flowing through from low socio-economic areas. The Claremont College project (see case study below) has taken considerable investment of money and in particular time, from university and college staff. The outcomes, with over 60 students from this college now enrolling at UTAS each year when 5 years ago there was only a handful, demonstrate what can be done to change a culture. The 'value-add' for students as individuals and their communities is considerable, and well worth the investment.

### *Claremont College Case Study*

*The need for the Claremont College/ University of Tasmania Project arose from concerns that students in the catchment area for Claremont College were qualifying for, and participating in, higher education at a much lower level than students in other Year 11/12 government colleges in the state.*

*For example, in 2002/2003, 49% of the College's Year 11 intake was in the most socially disadvantaged category (State average 21%). Of the 2003 cohort of students, 12% qualified for university entrance (State average 47%).*

*Other challenges included Claremont College having the highest Educational Needs Index (ENI) of any college in the state, and almost half of the College's students being in receipt of support benefits.*

*Claremont College and UTAS responded with a project aimed at raising the awareness of the value of continuing on to higher education study among students, staff, parents, and members of the community in the College's catchment area. It was planned to extend over five years, from 2006-2010, to allow time to create a tangible shift in culture and a broader community perception of the value of further education. The Project has four target areas*

- 1. Supporting past Claremont College students now at UTAS*
- 2. Supporting current pre-tertiary students and improving UTAS application and enrolment figures*
- 3. Building motivation and expectations of university study in students currently enrolled in Claremont College's liaison schools*
- 4. Building community awareness and engagement*

*Strategies have included*

- A Student Liaison Teacher based one day a week at the University*
- Provision of a well-resourced, well-used University Resource Room at Claremont College*
- Purchase of 'in demand' texts by the College Library*
- Expansion of scholarship opportunities for Claremont College students now at UTAS*
- Operation of the Pre-tertiary Teachers' Support Group*
- Provision of support for pre-tertiary class visits to the university and university lecturers' visits to the College*
- Support for College pre-tertiary students by current University students.*

## **Scholarships**

An important way in which educational institutions can assist students financially is through the provision of scholarships. Business, industry and the broader community within the region can be encouraged to contribute to scholarship programs, which in turn will strengthen the ties between the institution and the community.

In 2008 almost \$8.5 million was paid to UTAS students in scholarships and bursaries, including Commonwealth Scholarships. Of this, some \$1.4 million was from direct sponsorship by regional communities, business, industry, and state and local government.

## **Springboard to Higher Education**

An example of scholarship support to encourage higher education participation is the UTAS 'Springboard to Higher Education' program. The program was developed to address Tasmania's poor retention rates, which are amongst the lowest in Australia for Years 11 and 12. The program is a partnership between UTAS, business and community sponsors, and schools, with bursary recipients receiving \$500 - \$750 a year for each year of Years 11 and 12, and the first year of university.

Students are identified by their schools for bursaries on the basis that they:

- Need financial assistance to continue to further education;
- Are likely to be successful in Years 11 and 12 and university, if given support and encouragement;
- Are from a family with no tradition of participation in tertiary education;
- Merit the support, in the opinion of the schools.

In 2009, 118 students were supported under this program, with the total value of scholarships over \$80,000.

## **Study Options**

Students who wish to remain in regional areas while they study generally have their study options limited to the courses offered by the nearest regional institution or to distance education and on-line courses offered remotely.

The student experience available through distance and on-line courses is significantly different to the face-to-face delivery of courses. Students typically are required to be highly motivated and independent learners in order to be successful, which may be challenging for those who have not had prior exposure to higher education elsewhere. The capacity of providers to deliver some form of local support (both educational and pastoral) to students is normally limited if there is not a physical presence in the region.

## The short and long-term impact of current and proposed government policies on regional university and TAFE college enrolments

All of these issues require innovative responses and the Government's current targets and policy settings should provide significant incentives for universities to develop new models of delivery and cross-sectoral collaboration.

The fact that Tasmania only has one university, the unique partnership between the Tasmanian Government and UTAS and the recent reforms to the Tasmanian post-year 10 education systems create a real opportunity to implement significant cross-sectoral reform within the State which could provide a national model for addressing the problems of regional communities.

We have included an outline of a strategic initiative being undertaken by UTAS in collaboration with the Tasmanian Academy and senior secondary colleges in Tasmania as an example of the systemic changes that might be achieved to support greater access to higher education in regional and rural communities.

### **UTAS-College program**

The UTAS-College program is an initiative that UTAS has developed on a pilot basis and has funded from its own resources. We think it provides an excellent model for regional communities facing problems in higher education participation and graduate skills shortages.

The UTAS-College program addresses a number of key elements of the University's strategic agenda including:

- Improving HE participation, particularly for regional students;
- Embedding ongoing professional development for teachers and creating an environment to support cross-sectoral collaboration;
- Creating regional networks to encourage higher education aspirations, and provision of a supportive transition to university, including the capacity to undertake initial years of a university degree in regional communities;

The program involves developing and implementing a more effective relationship between UTAS and Tasmanian Year 12 providers. It will do this by providing clearer transition pathways from Year 12 to university, enabling capable pre-tertiary students to commence university studies in some units whilst still undertaking Year 12.

The concept of enabling high achieving students to complete some university units whilst undertaking Year 12 occurs in some universities already, however it does so on a relatively small scale. This project involves a systemic embedding of this approach and broadening the base to support all capable pre-tertiary students.

### **Benefits of the program**

This embedding will provide a range of benefits to students – giving a 'head-start' on a

tertiary study path, and the encouragement and opportunity to complete some university units for those who might not normally have higher education aspirations, or who might not have the confidence to undertake university studies, as well as giving them the chance to complete part of a university course before moving to a metropolitan university.

This also provides an opportunity for students to test their capacity and interest in specific degree programs before making an informed decision. This is a common problem for new students, with many deciding to change course after a semester or two of study. The problem of false starts and the need to undertake further study because of a change of course simply adds to the cost burden for rural and regional students. Providing opportunities to experience elements of higher education whilst in a supported environment should help to address this issue.

UTAS will provide professional development/discipline upgrading for Year 12 teachers through appropriate Graduate Certificates, which will improve teaching quality generally, as well as improving links between senior secondary teachers and university academics; and enabling appropriately trained teachers to deliver first year university units within Year 12 schools.

Benefits will include improved regional participation in Year 12 and higher education study; better access for rural/regional and low SES students; and an improvement in the quality of Year 12 teachers through ongoing professional development. It will also provide a network of university-linked teachers who may support students undertaking on-line/distance units within their regional communities.

Providing professional development to Year 12 teachers to support first year university units offers a high degree of professional recognition to teachers, is likely to encourage them to update and improve their discipline knowledge and pedagogical skills on a regular basis, and will encourage the development of strong relationships with university colleagues, offering opportunities to engage in research and professional development. These teachers will also play a key role in encouraging, developing and supporting student aspirations to undertake higher education.

Schools and teachers involved in delivering first year university units will create networks in collaboration with UTAS to provide ongoing support to students in regional areas who continue their studies in external/flexible mode, creating better support mechanisms for this cohort who traditionally have poor retention and progression rates. This will help address workforce issues in those regional areas, as students can both enter the job market and undertake flexibly delivered study with comprehensive support mechanisms in place.

Our initial objective is to create a network of accredited teachers who support students in regional areas to complete a first year of university study in their home community.

## **Conclusion**

The current policy settings and targets are encouraging and should generate creative and innovative solutions. There needs to be greater clarity about transitional arrangements and

about the long-term funding support for such initiatives. It is somewhat disappointing that there will be a delay in fully implementing some of these budget initiatives.

The following elements of the Commonwealth's recent Higher Education budget offer real potential for universities to provide increasing support to regional communities.

**An Innovation and Higher Education System for the 21st Century – support to increase participation of students from low socio-economic status backgrounds**

The Government will provide \$436.9 million over four years to universities to support increased participation from students from low socio-economic status backgrounds. Funding equivalent to 2 per cent of teaching and learning grants will be provided in 2010, rising to 3 per cent in 2011 and 4 per cent in 2012. The additional funding will provide \$324.7 million to support a new financial loading for students from low socio-economic status backgrounds and provide \$108.2 million to universities to build long-term partnerships with schools and communities which lift the aspirations of students from low socio-economic and other disadvantaged backgrounds.

**An Innovation and Higher Education System for the 21st Century – Structural Adjustment Fund**

The Government will provide \$202.1 million over four years to establish a new Structural Adjustment Fund to assist higher education institutions adapt to the introduction of a demand-driven system for Australian Government funded higher education places for Australian students.

**An Innovation and Higher Education System for the 21st Century – funding for institutional performance targets**

The Government will provide \$206.4 million over two years from 2011-12 to reward higher education institutions for the achievement of performance targets. This funding will encourage institutions to increase participation and attainment rates in priority areas including students from low socio-economic backgrounds. Performance payments of approximately 2.5 per cent of total government funding for teaching and learning will be provided, based on achievement against annual performance targets to be negotiated with each institution.

The importance of the Commonwealth recognising the particular missions and priorities within each provider's compact and allowing funding to flow to sustain these priorities is the critical strategic issue. This does not necessarily require additional funding beyond that provided for existing higher education places – although some initial incentives are likely to help stimulate new approaches to supporting regional participation – but this will add a substantial amount to the recurrent cost of higher education if universities are successful in meeting the Commonwealth targets.

These systemic changes cannot be developed and implemented confidently on the basis of one-year or even three-year funding cycles. It is to be hoped that negotiations in relation to university compacts will incorporate long-term planning and support for such systemic change. This is also likely to require bipartisan support and commitment as the target timeframe is likely to include changes of government. The fact that this Government is setting long-term (15 year) targets is a positive sign.