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**Submission to the
Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Committee**

**'Rural and Regional Access to Secondary and Tertiary
Education Opportunities'**

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Rural and Regional Access to Secondary and Tertiary Education Opportunities

TAFE Directors Australia (TDA) welcomes this invitation to comment on issues relevant to rural and regional access to educational opportunities.

TDA is the peak national body representing Australia's 58 TAFE Institutes and TAFE Divisions of dual sector universities. In this response, we have commented in general terms on some of the key matters affecting TAFE students and institutions in rural regional and remote parts of Australia. *However, we ask the Committee to note that some of the more pressing problems relate to the specific impact of government measures on particular local economies and communities. We would see considerable value in this more detailed information being provided to the Committee by the individual TDA member institutions concerned in an appropriate consultative forum.*

1. TDA Support for a greater focus on regional, rural and remote access to education.

The Bradley Report on higher education emphasised the need for a consistent and equitable approach to workforce development and industry needs including outer metropolitan and regional areas where there is significant population, low levels of educational attainment and participation, and uneven provision.

TDA strongly supports this principle. As we noted in our response to the Bradley Report, TAFE institutes are particularly well placed, especially in rural and regional areas, to contribute to raising participation of disadvantaged students.

In terms of its vast network of campuses and outreach centres across Australia, TAFE has a far greater footprint in remote and regional communities than universities. TAFE has the physical presence, the community profile and the infrastructure, making its participation critical to the achievement of government objectives in these areas.

However, the distinction between metropolitan and non-metropolitan students seems to be based on a distinction made in the university sector. This is too broad to allow adequate consideration of the significant differences in educational access between large regional centres and distant rural and remote communities.

Government policies and financial measures need to be more finely tuned to take account of these differences, if they are to meet their objectives of greater equity in tertiary education and workforce participation. In this regard, the most urgent requirement relates to the financial circumstances of students from distant rural and remote communities including, but not confined to, many Indigenous communities.

2. The educational needs of students in rural and regional communities.

2.1 Basic skills:

Non-metropolitan regions tend to have a larger proportion of communities and individuals in lower socio-economic groups. Students from these backgrounds are less likely either to complete their secondary education or to progress, without undue difficulty, to tertiary education. Their capacity to earn and to contribute to economic development is doubly limited by their lower levels of educational attainment and by the limited employment opportunities for unskilled and semi-skilled workers in rural and regional areas.

People who wish to continue or return to study in these regions have often experienced past difficulty with schooling and have requirements for literacy and numeracy support that would prevent their direct admission into university. TAFE has developed expertise in engaging with these students, especially if they are from indigenous backgrounds. Recent research by NCVER demonstrated that VET and TAFE significantly out-perform the higher education sector in terms of disadvantaged students accessing post-secondary education.

These basic skills programs are an acknowledged part of the structural changes that will be required of tertiary education. Much of it is necessarily preparatory to further formal study and cannot feasibly be undertaken except while living at home. Yet the structural adjustment funding provision in the 2009 budget is limited to universities, which normally provide study skills courses only to students who have already been admitted to degree programs and which do have either the facilities or the programs which are as geographically and financially accessible as those offered by TAFE.

A direct allocation of funds to TAFE Institutes with campuses and services in rural and remote areas could significantly accelerate increases in the tertiary participation and success rates of students from the poorest Australian communities.

2.2 Academic and Conceptual Skills:

A number of government measures, including the changes to the youth allowance, are contributing to the marked increase in enrolments in TAFE Diplomas and Advanced Diplomas particularly in the larger regional towns in the south eastern states (See Section 3 below).

The increase in TAFE students who also have aspirations to undertake higher education should act as an incentive to both universities and TAFE Institutes to improve and consolidate articulation arrangements. In many cases this will require TAFE Institutes to adequately prepare students for higher education forms of learning as part of their obligation to serve the full range of adult education needs in rural communities.

The Australian Government has earmarked a considerable portion of the new structural adjustment funds to improve the integration of TAFE and higher education and to foster articulation and related collaborative arrangements. However, to date, there has been little observable change in the approach of many universities in terms of initiatives which would benefit students in regional and rural areas.

Improvements in articulation and other collaborative arrangements require close and active bilateral relationships with universities but TAFE is not the recipient of funding which recognises the considerable costs in developing and maintaining these relationships and arrangements. *TDA believes that TAFE could generate a return on these funds more quickly than many universities, particularly in rural and remote areas where universities lack much of the incentive because of potentially low student numbers.*

3. Financial Barriers to participation by students from low SES backgrounds and by Indigenous students

While TDA appreciates the Australian Government's intention in lowering the eligibility age for the independent living allowance, there are a number of unforeseen negative consequences of the new arrangements for many students living in rural and remote areas. These include:

- Like metropolitan students, regional and rural students who have deferred their university enrolment for a year are disadvantaged by the unexpected increase in the required period of prior employment. The application of this rule to students who have already made plans on the basis of the previous eligibility requirements, appears to constitute an effective, albeit unintended, retrospective application of the current regulation. *It would appear to be more fair and reasonable to exempt students who had already deferred studies for one year from the new requirements.*
- In some regions, there has been a discernible increase in enrolments in TAFE Diploma and Advanced Diploma level courses by intending university students for whom the changed youth allowance has made immediate university entrance unfeasible. However, the very poorest of these are also unable to meet the steeply increased TAFE course fees recently imposed in some jurisdictions.
- In the case of regional and rural students the problems of the new allowance arrangements are exacerbated by the greater difficulties they experience in obtaining the level of employment earnings required for them to qualify for the independent youth allowance.
- The costs of travel and accommodation for students attending universities away from home are prohibitive for many, possibly the majority of, people in many regional and rural communities. In terms of TAFE provision this affects not only those who move to larger centres for full time study, but the majority of part-time students in the trade programs that require blocked periods of institution-based training for rural students who cannot attend on a daily or weekly basis.

It also affects other students, such as nurses and welfare practitioners, who are required to attend clinical or field placements provided by institutions that operate only in metropolitan or larger regional centres.

- In most jurisdictions apprentices are given some assistance towards their costs but this is not sufficient to cover the costs of accommodation. There are several reports of young apprentices living in and out of their cars while on block study away from home. For part time students other than apprentices, there is no assistance available.
- This problem has become more severe with the recent increases in accommodation costs in metropolitan areas. Some students are now locked out of post-school education because they cannot afford to meet the rent and other living costs of attending the required training even for very limited periods of time.
- Students from farming families are experiencing an additional difficulty because, where there has been a significant capital investment in farm improvement and productivity, the income plus assets means test disqualifies them from receiving any study support.

4. Educational needs and provision within rural and regional communities

There is a strong case, on both economic and social grounds, for a significant upgrade of TAFE facilities in some regional and in most rural and remote areas of Australia. Many young people in country areas seek a TAFE qualification as a means of earning a living in order to subsequently attend university part time. Older students are likely to attend TAFE part-time and have work and/or family commitments which will keep them in the area. These people represent the economic future of rural Australia but at present there is a serious imbalance in their access to learning facilities.

In terms of Commonwealth programs, TDA emphasises the need for further consideration of investment both in new built facilities and in communication infrastructure.

4.1 The need for additional facilities

At present, Commonwealth capital funding for both TAFE and universities is largely submission driven, based on merit and consistency with the context of particular government priorities. The Education Infrastructure Fund is an example of this principle.

While TDA appreciates that these arrangements are designed to foster excellence and respond to national priorities, they have the effect of rewarding the high achieving, high profile institutions at the expense of those that may need the most assistance in order to effectively provide for some of Australia's poorest communities and most vulnerable local economies.

While there are some opportunities for collaboration with universities, across much of Western Australia, South Australia and Queensland, it is more realistic to consider the possibilities for combined programs and shared facilities with secondary schools. However the Government's approach to trade training centres for secondary schools, means that few of these will be suitable for TAFE to train apprentices or to upgrade the skills of trades assistants.

TDA believes that the Australian government should review the criteria for allocating these funds to take account of the benefits of equalising the economic and social outcomes which would accrue from funding industry standard vocational training facilities for institutions located in the nation's poorer areas of regional and rural Australia.

4.2 Communication Infrastructure

Flexible delivery of education programs and services is a vital and urgent need if country Australia is to have equal access and opportunity in the knowledge economy. TDA welcomes the Australian Government's recognition that this will require a speedy rollout of 21st century broadband infrastructure.

The need for improved broadband infrastructure is the most common priority among TDA's rural and regional member Institutes, with the most pressing need being among those that serve large and sparsely populated areas such as the Wheatbelt of Western Australia and the north of South Australia.

TDA acknowledges the Australian Government's recent initiatives in this sphere but we emphasise that a number of factors need to be given greater consideration if the future development of broadband is to meet the needs of regional and rural communities.

These include:

- The uncertain rollout schedule for VET broadband and the apparent priority being given to densely populated areas where, arguably, it is least needed. At present it appears that even relatively settled areas such as north-western Victoria are uncertain of benefiting from this service in the foreseeable future. *In order to both facilitate rational planning by TAFE and other local education providers and also to allow individuals to take full advantage of the proposed infrastructure, rural communities require a more definite indication of when educational broadband might become available.*
- *The need to ensure an integrated VET and University broadband network.* Increasingly, students in both metropolitan and rural areas are seeking to combine access to university and TAFE services to obtain both employer-recognised skills and a pathway to a profession. For students in country Australia, this will depend on their access to an integrated and compatible broadband based education. This needs to be recognised and built into the initial design of the system rather than repeat the mistakes of the past by assuming that the needs of TAFE and VET 'down the track' will be compatible with the initial roll out to universities.

Without this provision, rural communities will be unable to access the more integrated services and programs of the Australian tertiary education system.

- *The need to supplement the flexible learning services delivered via broadband with mobile tuition units.* This is particularly important for Indigenous and other very poor communities with a high proportion of inexperienced learners and a low current level of computer literacy. TAFE in the Northern Territory has had considerable success with these mobile units.

5. Affordability of Program Delivery

Funding models of the Commonwealth and some state governments fail to take account of the different costs of delivery in metropolitan and regional areas. A particular problem is the pricing regime for the Commonwealth's Productivity Places Program which funds job seeker training at the same per capita rate regardless of where and how it is to be delivered. The viability of this rate depends on a certain minimum scale of provision. While in metropolitan areas, the numbers of participants makes the rate viable, at least for some occupations, it is not possible to achieve this in rural centres such as Bourke, NSW or in remote Indigenous communities.

TDA acknowledges that TAFE provision is often at a higher cost than some low-budget, single sector private providers. However, given the thin markets and low absolute level of student demand that prevail in many country areas, TAFE is often the only provider capable of delivering the program.

Country job seekers are thus doubly disadvantaged – they have fewer employment opportunities and a reduced possibility of subsidised retraining or upskilling to improve their prospects.

The need to make vocational training more accessible to small numbers is particularly important for Indigenous communities. Two or three successful outcomes for Indigenous students, while too low to appear as a statistical success story, can act as the catalyst for long term change in educational and workforce participation throughout the community.

TDA believes that, particularly in the context of uneven trends in unemployment growth, the Australian government should review its pricing and provision policies for job seeker training with a view to improving the viability and accessibility of this training for individuals in country Australia.

6. Conclusion

This response has attempted to alert the Committee to the most pressing issues confronting current and prospective tertiary students and TAFE Institutes in regional, rural and remote Australia. TDA, together with many of our member Institutes, would welcome the opportunity to meet with the Committee to expand on the matters raised here and to provide more specific examples based on the direct experience of those TAFE Directors who are most familiar with the issues.