

10 August 2009

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

Email: rrat.sen@aph.gov.au



Dear Ms Radcliffe,

Please find attached RMIT's submission to the Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee inquiry into Rural and Regional Access to Secondary and Tertiary Education Opportunities.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in purple ink that reads "Margaret Gardner".

Professor Margaret Gardner AO
Vice-Chancellor and President

RMIT University – Submission to the Senate Inquiry into Rural and Regional Access to Secondary and Tertiary Education Opportunities

Introduction

RMIT University welcomes the opportunity to provide input into the Senate inquiry into Rural and Regional Access to Secondary and Tertiary Education Opportunities.

RMIT is a dual sector university with 70,000 students globally in over 950 higher education and TAFE programs that range from apprenticeship training through to doctoral research. Enrolments are drawn from across the state and internationally with diversity of the student body being an important characteristic of the RMIT experience. RMIT's rural and regional students contribute to this diversity comprising nearly 14% of the total student population.

RMIT recognises that educational disadvantage and disengagement is caused by complex social factors and that there are real barriers to accessing education. At the same time, RMIT believes that education has a transformative role in enabling individuals to reach their full potential which helps to create an equal and democratic society and increases economic and social capital. Consequently RMIT's student population is as diverse as our society generally.

The following discussion focuses on the implications and adequacy of the proposed government measures (Terms of Reference 3 and 5) on rural and regional students attending metropolitan universities. It further suggests initiatives to improve access and participation for these students and to support the achievement of Commonwealth equity targets.

The implications of current and proposed government measures on prospective students living in rural and regional areas

RMIT is committed to ensuring access to educational opportunities to all including those from disadvantaged circumstances. The University's experience shows that providing these opportunities to disadvantaged students, including those from rural and regional areas, requires a range of responses. To this end, RMIT supports the overall package of reforms to student income support as announced in the 2009-2010 Commonwealth Budget. The financial support, including Student Start-up Scholarships and Relocation Scholarships, will provide an incentive to eligible students to pursue post secondary education, including rural and regional students. A student who qualifies for full benefits of Austudy, ABSTUDY or Youth Allowance (including rental assistance) can expect reasonable support from the new government package.

However, the financial support provided by the Commonwealth will not match the cost of living for students¹. Further, while the package of reforms may better target those in need of support, it is likely to have unintended negative consequences for rural and regional students. In particular, changes to the eligibility criteria for Youth Allowance (i.e. parental income test and the workforce participation criteria) are likely to be especially difficult for rural and regional students and families and will continue to limit their access to post secondary education as detailed below.

The expected increase to the family assets and parental income test does address previous deficits for rural and regional families, but the new threshold (\$42,559) is still too low; it captures families that are very poor but excludes the moderately poor, whether urban or rural. As a result it will continue to make the dependence criteria inaccessible for many rural and regional families, forcing students to defer to meet the independence criteria. This brings with it the risk of non-participation as research indicates that regional students who defer enrolment are less likely to take up further education than those who do not defer². RMIT therefore recommends that the family income threshold be increased for rural families and urban families, though at a significantly higher rate for rural families. Further, to assess the most appropriate rate we suggest that DEEWR

¹ Universities Australia's 2007 Student Finances Survey estimated that students were \$4,890 out of pocket annually based on a median income.

² Naomi Godden. *Regional Young People and Youth Allowance: Access to Tertiary Education*, 2007.

model the impact on participation of different threshold levels taking into account the costs that are particular to rural students as a key input into the Senate deliberations.

The proposed changes to the workforce participation criteria also need to be reviewed to ensure rural and regional students are not unduly disadvantaged. Increasing the amount of time prospective students need to work in order to qualify for independent Austudy is difficult for students coming from non-metropolitan backgrounds where employment opportunities may be limited. Further, given that many rural and regional students satisfy the independence criteria through workforce participation by deferring university for one year, the proposed transition date (1 January 2010) is not satisfactory. RMIT recommends that those students currently on a gap year are given access to Youth Allowance under the previous arrangement.

The adequacy of government measures to provide for students who are required to leave home for secondary and post secondary study

Improving participation in post secondary education requires a focus on broader social, educational and cultural factors as well as financial factors. According to the 2008 Universities Australia *Participation and Equity* report, under-representation in higher education of people from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds (including rural and regional students) is the result of patterns of social and educational disadvantage that are experienced well before people reach the point of considering whether or not to apply for university. Factors that influence participation rates include: a lower rate of secondary education; lower socio-economic status; and, lack of access to information about post secondary opportunities. Many of these issues are outside the role of, and beyond the capacity of, universities to influence.

To address this issue a government policy response that extends beyond financial support to include a broad range of services dedicated to attracting and retaining rural and regional students is required, e.g. affordable transportation and accommodation, access to social networks and better information about post secondary opportunities.

Some of the successful initiatives that RMIT has implemented that we believe are exemplars for the sector include:

- Non-ENTER based admissions schemes such the Schools Network Access Program (SNAP) and the Indigenous Access Scheme.
 - SNAP is a teacher recommendation access scheme targeting 43 secondary schools, including several regional secondary schools, with low rates of participation in higher education.
 - The Indigenous Access Scheme is a non-competitive based admissions scheme for Indigenous applicants to TAFE and undergraduate programs at RMIT. The Scheme, introduced in 2008, drew the majority of applicants from regional Victoria
- A range of transition and support initiatives intended to address the needs of rural and regional students including: online learning lab; English language electives courses for students that may experience difficulty with academic language; and, Peer Assisted Learning that supports the transition into higher education and improves retention and success of rural and regional students

These initiatives have led to an increase in the access rates for rural and regional students at RMIT as well as contributed to strong retention and completion outcomes³. RMIT would welcome the opportunity to work with the Commonwealth to inform national policy responses on this issue, including the delivery of appropriately resourced student support services to meet the expanded requirements of the new equity targets.

Additional policy initiatives that promote collaboration and partnership between the different educational sectors to attract rural and regional students should also be considered. RMIT

³ The proportion of RMIT's commencing students increased from 9% in 2002 to 14% in 2008. In 2007 RMIT's retention ratio was 1.02 (compared to 0.97 nationally) and the completion ratio was 1.04 (compared to 0.99 nationally).

welcomes the proposed support in the recent budget for the development of a new partnerships program to link universities with low SES schools and vocational education and training providers. Initiatives such as this will reach students who might not otherwise consider a university education. RMIT recommends that given the expected difficulties in the sector of realising the 20% equity targets that the Commonwealth plan an early review of policy initiatives in consultation with universities.

Conclusion

In closing, RMIT reiterates its support for the overall package of reforms proposed by the Commonwealth but believes both specific changes to the Youth Allowance eligibility criteria and a wider policy focus, including a broad range of support and transition services, will promote stronger outcomes for rural and regional students.

In order to ensure continued opportunity for rural and regional students, RMIT recommends that the Inquiry:

- Request that DEEWR model the impact on participation of different family income thresholds with a view to significantly increasing the level for rural families.
- Support the continuation of existing Youth Allowance arrangements for rural students currently on a gap year to ensure that they are not further disadvantaged by the new criteria
- Consider support for a broad range of policy responses that extend beyond financial support and focus on systemic barriers to participation including information and outreach about post secondary opportunities to secondary schools, non-ENTER based admissions schemes and transition and support services.