Inquiry into Rural and Regional Access to Secondary and Tertiary Education Opportunities

Prepared for the *Senate Standing Committee on Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport*

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Introduction

This Submission to the Senate draws from my doctoral work in rural schools (see Cuervo forthcoming, 2007, 2006) and my work, and that of my colleagues, in the Youth Research Centre, at the University of Melbourne (see Dwyer et al. 2003, 2005, Taylor 2008, Wyn et al. 2008a, 2008b, 2009). It is in response to the government's assessment of access to secondary and post-secondary education opportunities to students from rural and regional communities.

Rural communities are not homogeneous

The first point I want to make from the evidence in my thesis is that there is a misconceptualisation about the homogeneity of rural communities. That is, I demonstrate that the broad social scenario in which rural school people are inserted is one of diversity. For instance, some rural towns have socio-economically progressed in the last decade (e.g. coastal-tourist towns, mining towns) and some have continued in decline (e.g. "agricultural towns" battling with an on-going problem of the drought).

Therefore, some rural schools face extreme challenges on account of the socio-economic status of rural communities they are part of, while others have benefited from the progress. In sum, throughout the thesis I argue that rural communities are far from being static and homogeneous entities. Thus, government policies should pay special attention to the social context of each community. In other words, in many instances, policies have to be place-based.

Current challenges faced by rural schools

The second point I want to make is that some of the problems that rural education suffers have been portrayed a decade ago by the national inquiry of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC 2000a, 2000b), which has been arguably the most important study into the state and needs of rural education in Australia and into possible strategies for its improvement. Unfortunately, in many aspects of rural education (e.g. staffing of rural schools, lack of services, lack of breadth of curriculum, scarce post-school pathways) the HREOC report is still relevant. Moreover, I argue in my thesis that the unresolved problems depicted by the HREOC report reinforce the

peripheral position of rural education within the national educational policy arena and the research agenda.

For example, my research participants argued that an unequal distribution of resources – decreasing funding, the run-down facilities, the inability to offer a broad curriculum and the difficulties to recruit and retain staff– creates educational disadvantages in rural schools. This lack of resources has implications for rural students in achieving a relevant and high-quality of education that will allow them to fully participate in the different spheres of society. In the case of one of the schools in south-east Gippsland, Victoria, it also impacts on their 'competition' with the nearby private school. Thus, under-resourced public schools face the challenge of losing students to private schools, becoming a residual option for low socioeconomic families that cannot afford the fees in private schools. Moreover, some rural students lack the chance of 'choice' because they do not have a private school close by.

Another critical issue for rural schools is the recruitment and retainment of staff. It has been extensively asserted that teachers are critical in the quality of the educational experience of rural students; in the continuity and success of school policies and curriculum implementation; and in the development of a supportive professional community. Reports concerning the staffing of rural schools present a fairly consistent picture. Many rural schools across Australia experience difficulty in recruiting staff, especially at secondary level (see Cuervo forthcoming, 2007). This difficulty in staffing rural schools has a direct impact in the quality of education received by rural students; including placing a greater pressure in the staff to perform duties beyond their training and capacity.

Positive aspects of rural schooling

The third point I want to make is that not all views about rural schooling were positioned in terms of disadvantage by the participants in my thesis. Despite the sense of frustration about the daily barriers rural students, teachers and parents feel there is an appreciation of what rural schools can offer. Traditionally, rural schools have been attributed with advantages in school organisation which led to a higher degree of individualised attention for students; a stronger cohesion between students and parents with the school and its staff; easiness and flexibility in the implementation of innovations; and lower levels of

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student discipline problems. Other schooling advantages reflected by rural people and in the rural literature have to do with growing up and learning in a caring environment and the development of a greater autonomy and responsibility by students. My research reveals that some of these issues are present in rural schooling; however, it would be a mistake to view all schools (and communities) as socially cohesive.

The Second Disadvantage

The fourth point in this submission has to do with rural youth post-school transitions to further study. The evidence from my thesis reveals that rural young people suffer greater structural barriers to achieve their post-school goals. If poor quality of rural school staffing and lack of resources are initial disadvantages for rural youth then structural barriers to further study and employment become a "second disadvantage" (Cuervo forthcoming). The evidence shows that within the current neoliberal environment of greater individualisation and economic competition the road for rural young people to achieve their full potential in society is more complicated and layered with more obstacles than for many of their metropolitan counterparts.

For young people living in rural areas to continue with further studies and employment after finishing school, most probably, will mean that they have to abandon their communities. The reasons are embedded in a general lack of lack of post-school services and infrastructure. These reasons are supported by the findings in the *Life Patterns* project[1] at the Youth Research Centre over the last 18 years with our first cohort (who left school in 1991) and our second cohort (who left school in 2005-2006) (see Dwyer et al. 2003, 2005, Wyn et al. 2008a, Wyn et al. 2009). For instance, within the second cohort, aged 20-21 years old in 2009, of those who were living in rural areas and country towns in 2005, 36% moved to capital cities and 32% to regional cities. Only 32% stayed in country towns or rural areas. The reasons to leave their communities were mostly based in the lack of further studies and employment opportunities.

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[1] The Life-Patterns Project is a longitudinal mixed-method study of two cohorts of young Australians making their post secondary school transitions. The first stage of the project commenced in 1991, following a cohort of young people who had just completed their secondary education. The project has now been following this group of Australians for over sixteen years. During late 2005 and 2006 a new cohort of Australian students in their final two years of high school was recruited to the life patterns project. The study is conducted in Victoria, NSW, Tasmania and ACT.

Most importantly, our research shows that location, where a young person lives, was the strongest variable that had an important link with the likelihood of our participants going onto further study. Thus, participants from metropolitan areas were more likely to go on with study (74%) than students from regional cities (62%), country towns (58%) and rural areas outside of towns (64%) (Wyn et al. 2008b). Furthermore, data from the *Life Patterns* study reveals that the combination of living in a rural area and coming from a poor socio-economic background is a strong limitation to the aspiration of continuing with higher and further studies. Finally, it is important to state that while research studies in rural youth out-migration generally portrayed significant gender differences in the post-school transitions, symbolising rural spaces as "male spaces"; findings in my thesis and in the *Life Patterns* project do not reflect this disparity.

Rural youth out-migration

Rural population decline, especially among rural youth, finds its driving force in structural limitations. In accord with the Victorian parliamentary inquiry, *Inquiry into Retaining Young People in Rural Towns and Communities* (RRSDC 2006), lack of access to further education and training, and employment, are the main reasons for young people leaving their communities. Moreover, there are an array of secondary factors, such as a lack of appropriate housing, and the impact of the drought on farm production and on the sense of the future of the viability of the community.

Many young people (and their parents) believe leaving town was the only option to find a job or continue into higher and further education. This necessity to leave town produces in rural communities a tension between the need of young people to search for new horizons that provide educational and employment opportunities and the sustainability of the rural towns they leave behind (Cuervo forthcoming).

The findings of my thesis reveal that those young people who decide to remain in their communities, especially those who leave school early, undergo significant unemployment and underemployment. The few jobs available in rural towns are generally casual or part-time and are strongly correlated to the economic activity in the area. To make matter worse, some young people who cannot find employment are denied access to welfare benefits, such as *Youth Allowance* (due to its means-testing character).

Moreover, all my participants' choices of post-school educational institution were tied to the possibility of moving in with relatives or friends, except those that moved into university colleges. This creates another barrier for those young people that wish to attend a higher or further education institution in a centre or town where they do not have a financial and emotional support (i.e. direct family, relatives and friends). Further, migrating into a metropolitan or regional centre to continue with higher and further study is a costly enterprise for rural youth and their families. Annual living costs for a regional young person studying away from home are estimated between $15,000 and $20,000, in addition to a relocation and start-up costs of $3,000 to $6,000 (Godden 2007). In addition, many of these young migrants are also denied the possibility to receive *Youth Allowance*.

Beyond structural limitations

The picture for rural students and their communities is not clear cut. Different studies affirm that young people's decision to leave their rural communities is much more complex than the ones elicited by structural limitations. Coupled with structural conditions is the importance of key personal and social relationships: family, friendships, and romantics, and negative experiences about life in rural communities (see Dwyer et al. 2003, RRSDC 2006, Wyn et al. 2008).

It is important to state that some young people have a dissatisfaction with their community and its attributes, which coupled with a failure to establish peer relationships and obtain consensual validation; resulting in loneliness, social isolation and alienation. Cultural issues, such as a lack of privacy, a view of youth as problematic and a constant adult gaze can be as negative experiences for young people and determinant forces in their migration to regional and metropolitan centres. Therefore, there is a need to make rural communities youth-friendly providing meaningful spaces of participation (Taylor 2008).

Conclusion

In sum, many of the perennial challenges faced by rural young people in receiving a socially just education and support in their transition from secondary school to higher and further studies are still present. The significance of this marginalisation of rural

schooling is that it fails to raise the standards and quality of rural education — a quality that, I argue through my doctoral work, has ramifications for the future sustainability of rural communities and prospects of rural young people. If rural community and school issues are peripheral to the national agenda it should come as no surprise that rural students do not receive the same quality of education as some of their metropolitan counterparts. This raises critical issues of social justice in rural education. These issues of social justice have to do with a better and greater distribution of resources but also with recognition of rural young people's value and the provision of spaces of meaningful participation in issues that affect their lives (Cuervo forthcoming). In sum, I believe this Senate Inquiry provides a good opportunity to address the issues stated in this submission.

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