

SENATE ENQUIRY INTO RURAL AND REGIONAL ACCESS TO SECONDARY AND TERTIARY EDUCATION OPPORTUNITIES

Submission from the University of South Australia

7 August 2009

Introduction

UniSA is committed to educating professionals; creating and applying knowledge; engaging our communities, and intends to be a leading contributor to Australia having the best higher education system in the world, supporting the world's best educated and most innovative, cohesive and sustainable society. UniSA values engagement, social justice and openness, and its dedication to providing tertiary education to community groups that have suffered disadvantage is embedded in its founding act.

UniSA contributes at all levels to the social, intellectual, economic and cultural development of the community. Meeting the present and future needs of society is the driving force behind its professional education programs and its applied research focus. The University recognises that it is enriched through its interaction with different communities and one of the characteristics that defines UniSA is its commitment to regional, industry and community engagement.

This commitment is manifest in UniSA's Centre for Regional Engagement, which has its operations based at Whyalla and Mount Gambier. In prioritising regional engagement as a strategic direction, the University of South Australia seeks to provide quality teaching, learning and scholarship in its regional locations and to undertake research endeavours with business, industry and community partners that reflect rural and regional priorities and interests. The Centre for Regional Engagement now has a strong research presence following the establishment of the University-supported Centre for Rural Health and Community Development. Innovative, nationally and internationally significant research is being undertaken by staff and higher research degree students into community and regional development, rural and Indigenous health and community wellbeing.

Studying at a regional location provides a truly unique university experience. Smaller class sizes can lead to more personal interactions between staff and students, often complemented by an enriched sense of community. Studying in a regional location also has many social and economic benefits. Many students are able to stay at home, have the support of their families and are able to continue with, or gain, some form of employment. There is also evidence that students who study in regional locations are more likely to choose to live in those regions when they graduate, thus helping secure a supply of trained professionals in essential areas of the economy.

The Centre for Regional Engagement provides targeted undergraduate and postgraduate degree programs designed to meet the needs of rural and regional communities. A one-year tertiary preparation program is also available at both Whyalla and Mount Gambier. However, the University is conscious that better funding to students, more appropriate funding to the universities as well as a range of different structural arrangements could improve rural and regional provision of higher education and

enhance participation and achievement.

UniSA also has a commitment in its founding legislation to supporting the access of Indigenous people to higher education. It has committed itself to reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people and has in place a range of programs to support the education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, some including provision in remote areas such as the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands (APY Lands). This model of provision is extremely expensive and requires full funding from government to address areas and populations experiencing such significant disadvantage.

Response to the Terms of Reference

The University of South Australia's response to the various issues raised in the Inquiry's Terms of Reference is presented below, under a statement of the relevant Term of Reference.

The Financial Impact on Rural and Regional Students Attending Metropolitan Secondary Schools, Universities or TAFEs

The 2006 census data show that participation rates from rural and regional areas are low and that overall the percentage of degree-qualified people is much lower than in metropolitan areas. In South Australia, the overall percentage of degree-qualified people is 22%, while in the eastern suburbs of Adelaide it is 42%. By contrast, it is only 12% in rural areas of the State.

The financial burden on families for students who need to leave home to study at a metropolitan institution is well documented. Typical extra costs (compared to a metropolitan-based student who lives at home) include:

Accommodation and living costs;

Transport costs (to travel to/from the rural or regional home);

Support costs (e.g., telephone to call home)

Such costs for most metropolitan locations in Australia would range between \$15,000 and \$20,000 per student per year.

If the rural or regionally-based family is unable to afford to support the student financially, then the student is forced to seek part-time employment, thereby detracting from their formal educational experience and potentially putting their educational performance at risk. However many students have difficulty maintaining regular paid work as they shift residence between country and metropolitan locations.

In addition, based on UniSA experience, there are many mature-age people in regional areas who would welcome the chance to improve their qualifications, but are constrained from moving because of job, house and family commitments. For them, it is essential that Government provides tertiary opportunities in the region, either campus-based or through technology.

Recommendation 1: That the Government implement a rural and regional premium for start-up scholarships.

The Education Alternatives for Rural and Regional Students Wanting to Study in Regional Areas

UniSA has a campus at Whyalla and a Regional Centre at Mount Gambier, thereby providing university-level education at the two largest regional cities in South Australia. Programs on offer include Nursing, Social Work, Business and Engineering. It is an ongoing challenge to provide a wider range of programs in markets that are smaller and more broadly distributed than those of metropolitan regions.

The Whyalla Campus also has relatively inexpensive on-site student accommodation (compared to metropolitan accommodation) and can therefore support students from surrounding rural and regional communities. Working on the presumption that a two to three hour drive in each direction is not an unreasonable option on a weekly basis, students could study at Whyalla and still maintain good family links (e.g., travelling home on weekends, etc.). This additional support enables students to focus on their studies without many of the additional financial and family-separation stresses of living in the metropolitan area.

Whilst face-to-face delivery is always preferable, the opportunities provided by current technologies make external delivery of courses a real possibility. A blended approach that allows rural and regional students to undertake a majority of their courses via distance education, but come into a regional or metropolitan centre for workshops or intensive face-to-face delivery sessions, will become more common.

However, studying as an external student can still be quite difficult, and technological solutions require access to technology (e.g., computers, video-conference equipment, etc.). UniSA evidence shows that external study is least suited to school leavers studying part-time but is more appropriate for mature-age and postgraduate students. The Government could consider a situation where specialist study centres are established in many rural and smaller regional centres. This would reduce the cost to the individual of supplying their own equipment and also provide a venue to share experiences and concerns with fellow students. If this is coordinated by universities or TAFEs, then it might also be possible to have staff visit these study centres on a regular basis to reinforce study materials on a face-to-face basis or engage local professionals to provide a tutoring service for rural and regional students.

Recommendation 2: That the Government (a) commission a study to analyse the provision of rural and regional campuses in relation to population in order to identify gaps in provision, and (b) consider an appropriate increase in support for small, technology-enabled study centres at more rural and regional locations.

The Implications of Current and Proposed Government Measures on Prospective Students Living in Rural and Regional Areas

A range of measures contained in the 2009 Federal Budget will impact upon rural and regional students – some positively and some adversely. UniSA's views on some of the measures are presented as a commentary after each one shown below:

Increase in the Parental Income Test threshold applying under Youth Allowance from \$32,800 to the maximum rate of Family Tax Benefit Part A (currently \$42,559).

This initiative is positive for students from rural and regional communities as many

families in these locations are 'doing it tough' and therefore it is expected that more children from these communities will be eligible.

UniSA supports the increase in the parental income test threshold.

Progressively reducing the Youth Allowance age of independence for students from 25 years in 2009 to 22 years from 2012.

This measure will help better target student income support to those most in need, including students from rural and regional locations.

UniSA supports the reduction in the Youth Allowance age of independence.

Tightening, from 2010, the workforce participation criteria for establishing independence under Youth Allowance.

This initiative has the potential to seriously disadvantage rural and regional students, as experience shows that rural and regional students are less likely to take up university studies if they have deferred their place to earn funds to become an independent student. This situation will be exacerbated by having to work longer to become eligible.

Recommendation 3: That the Government temporarily loosens the workforce participation criteria for establishing independence, either across the board or for students from rural and regional locations who have been genuinely 'caught' by the new legislation.

Introduction of a Relocation Allowance for eligible Youth Allowance and ABSTUDY students to relocate to attend university. [This measure replaces the existing Commonwealth Accommodation Scholarships and provides dependent students who live away from home, and independent students who are unable to live at home, with a \$4,000 allowance in their first year at university and \$1,000 in each year thereafter.]

This initiative is well-targeted at rural and regional students and recognises, at least partially, the additional impost for such students to study in metropolitan institutions. However, the \$1000 for second and subsequent years is insufficient and will not compensate for the additional costs associated with attending university for these students. It is recognised that it is not viable to provide tertiary study in many capital-intensive disciplines, such as dentistry and engineering, in regional areas under current funding and structural models.

Recommendation 4: That the Government increases the relocation allowance for second and subsequent years, preferably to \$4000 p.a.

Introduction from 2010 of a new indexed Student Start-Up Scholarship, valued at \$2,254 in 2010, for all university students receiving student income support. [This measure will replace the existing Commonwealth Education Costs Scholarship; Indigenous scholarships will remain unchanged.]

This measure, whilst not specifically targetted at rural and regional students, will provide them with some additional assistance. This Start-Up scholarship should be at a higher rate for students from regional and rural areas and should also be available for students

re-engaging with higher education in the regions (see Recommendation 1).

Provision of \$436.9 million over four years to universities to support increased participation from students from low socio-economic status backgrounds. [Funding equivalent to 2 percent of teaching and learning grants will be provided in 2010, rising to 3 percent in 2011 and 4 percent in 2012.]

This additional funding will enable universities to provide support to many rural and regional students from low socio-economic status backgrounds. It will also potentially support programs for raising educational aspirations in rural and regional communities. However, it is unlikely to fully support the cost of infrastructure and travel compared to metropolitan areas, so should be differentially weighted for rural and regional students. The current regional loading for students is manifestly inadequate for regional provision of campuses, technology, travel and the diseconomies of small classes. Data already provided to DEEWR by UniSA and Deakin University have provided detailed estimates of the additional costs involved in such provision.

Recommendation 5: That the Government reviews the provision of the regional loading to universities to cover the full cost of the provision of tertiary education in the regions.

Abolishing Commonwealth Scholarships for Associate Degrees.

This measure is particularly damaging to rural and regional students. Associate degrees are useful for students who may not have the full entry requirements for a degree or the financial support to commit to the full degree program (for example entry to an Associate Degree may be at a TER of 55 compared to a Bachelor Degree at a TER of 70). Rural and regional students frequently do not achieve the same level of results in Year 12 as their metropolitan counterparts due to the restricted course offerings in regional high schools and the lack of well qualified teachers in some disciplines (e.g., mathematics and science). This suggests that Associate Degrees provide a critical pathway for rural and regional students seeking tertiary qualifications.

UniSA offers Associate Degrees in Accounting, Business Ventures and Engineering to accommodate the needs of rural and regional students in South Australia. This government measure may adversely impact upon UniSA's enrolments in these programs.

Recommendation 6: That the Government reviews the abolition of Commonwealth Scholarships for Associate Degrees.

Increasing from 2010 the maximum annual student contribution amount for education and nursing units of study from the National Priority Band (\$4,162 in 2009) to Band 1 (\$5,201 in 2009).

This measure is likely to be neutral in impact.

The Short- and Long-Term Impact of Current and Proposed Government Policies on Regional University and TAFE College Enrolments

The Government measures that will be detrimental to enrolment numbers are the tightening of workforce criteria for the establishment of independence and the abolition

of Commonwealth scholarships for those undertaking Associate Degrees. However, other fiscal initiatives (e.g., increase in parental income test, reduced age of independence, funding for universities for low SES students) should counterbalance this and the net result on enrolments will probably be neutral in the short term and positive in the longer term.

Other Government policy initiatives, such as increasing the number of 24 to 35 year olds with degrees to 40% by 2025 and to 20% of people from low SES backgrounds having a degree by 2020, will have a positive impact on all universities but particularly regional universities (especially due to the high preponderance of low SES students in rural and regional communities). However, while useful for regional providers, this equity funding will be able to be used to greater advantage in metropolitan locations which have economies of scale. This equity funding does not explicitly address the additional costs of regional and rural provision, given smaller and more distributed markets relative to metropolitan areas, and the additional costs of regional infrastructure, travel and technology.

The Adequacy of Government Measures to Provide for Students who are Required to Leave Home for Secondary or Post-Secondary Study

UniSA's comments on this section of the Terms of Reference are effectively covered by the comments provided in section c., above.

The Educational Needs of Rural and Regional Students

As mentioned previously, rural and regional secondary school students have fewer educational opportunities than their metropolitan counterparts. Therefore, effort needs to be made to increase educational opportunities, including provision of a wider choice of courses (using technology, if necessary) and ensuring that well-qualified teachers (particularly for higher-level courses) are available. Similarly, TAFE courses available in rural areas are limited and often at levels that do not provide pathways to Bachelor Degree qualifications, i.e. Certificate IV and above. The limitations of the courses offered by both secondary schooling and TAFE mean that it is harder for rural and regional students to reach the minimum entry standards for tertiary education. This places an extra burden on universities to ensure that students are adequately prepared to commence higher education studies, through preliminary programs such as bridging courses or foundation studies.

Recommendation 7: That the Government recognises the issues and difficulties of achieving high university entrance scores for rural and regional students and provides increased funding to universities for bridging and foundation courses in these areas.

The Impact of Government Measures and Proposals on Rural and Regional Communities

Rural and regional communities need to retain younger, professionally-qualified people if they are to prosper in the longer term. Government initiatives need to focus more on rural and regional workforce development by supporting rural and regional students to undertake tertiary studies without losing their family and community support. This needs to be matched by support to Universities' regional loading to underpin their full

infrastructure, travel and technology costs. If students do need to relocate to the metropolitan area to complete their studies, then greater recognition of the associated financial and emotional stresses is required and the government needs to provide additional support in response.

Other Related Matters

If improvements are made to facilities and equipment in rural and regional communities to accommodate secondary and tertiary studies, then these facilities could also benefit other members of the community (e.g., computers with internet access could be provided as a wider community resource; professional development programs could be accessed through the study centres, etc.). It is well recognised that universities are significant nodes of regional economic development, and this could be leveraged to ensure that any investment in regional or rural campuses is able to deliver multiple community gains. A key issue to be considered is the amount of funding paid to universities for the maintenance of regional campuses and services, for the additional expenses of travel and technology to access remote locations, and to maintain a range of qualified staff to teach relatively small numbers of enrolled students.

A further issue for consideration is the funding for placement of metropolitan students in regional areas, as this has beneficial flow-on effects as these students are more likely to see the benefits of rural living. While country areas can often provide accommodation and billeting, these metropolitan students incur additional expenses such as travel and foregone income from part-time work. Relatively small scholarships would make a difference to their ability to take up rural placements and to the professional capability available in the regions and could help ease difficulties associated with finding clinical placements.

Recommendation 8: That the Government systematically fund placement scholarships for metropolitan students in identified areas of professional need to undertake professional placements in rural and regional areas.

Conclusion

UniSA welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this Senate enquiry and offers its considerable experience and insight into rural and regional matters to assist DEEWR enhance regional provision of tertiary education, to undertake pilot studies and evaluation of new approaches and offerings in regional South Australia.

UniSA supports mechanisms which provide increased funding to rural students to enable them to study in their regions, and, if necessary, to move successfully to metropolitan areas for courses which are unavailable in the regions.

UniSA supports mechanisms for the full funding of universities for the additional infrastructure, travel and technology costs and for the provision of courses in thin markets in rural and regional areas.

UniSA supports mechanisms for the better provision of bridging and foundation courses in recognition of the increased difficulty of adequate tertiary preparation in rural areas and for the placement of metropolitan students in rural areas.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: That the Government implement a rural and regional premium for start-up scholarships.

Recommendation 2: That the Government (a) commission a study to analyse the provision of rural and regional campuses in relation to population in order to identify gaps in provision, and (b) consider an appropriate increase in support for small, technology-enabled study centres at more rural and regional locations.

Recommendation 3: That the Government loosens the workforce participation criteria for establishing independence, either across the board or for students from rural and regional locations.

Recommendation 4: That the Government increases the relocation allowance for second and subsequent years to \$4000.

Recommendation 5: That the Government review the provision of the regional loading to universities to cover the full cost of the provision of tertiary education in the regions.

Recommendation 6: That the Government review the abolition of Commonwealth Scholarships for Associate Degrees.

Recommendation 7: That the Government recognises the issues and difficulties of achieving high university entrance scores for rural and regional students and provides increased funding to universities for bridging and foundation courses in these areas.

Recommendation 8: That the Government systematically fund placement scholarships for metropolitan students in identified areas of professional need to undertake professional placements in rural and regional areas.