

## **Submission to the Parliament of Australia Senate**

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

#### ***Introduction and background***

Committee for Ballarat facilitates economic and social development within Ballarat and its region to leave a notable and sustainable legacy for the entire community. We are not party-political and work closely with the three levels of government. We identify and work through projects and themes that target priority issues in key areas. Our membership is drawn from a wide range of business and community leaders in Ballarat and from across the region. Please refer to [www.committeeforballarat.com](http://www.committeeforballarat.com)

We have a strong interest in this Inquiry and its potential to 'make a difference', driven by our belief that secondary and tertiary education are key contributors to regional economic prosperity, social development and community cohesion. We have a long standing interest in the issues, such as may be seen through our previous submissions to the inquiries into voluntary student unionism and geographical differences in the rate of Victorian students' participation in higher education.

We recognise and appreciate the important and far-reaching roles that our regionally based, multi-sector university, the University of Ballarat, and each of our other regional university campuses, particularly the Aquinas Campus of the Australian Catholic University, play. They have earned deep regional respect and our support for their commitments and achievements.

They and their secondary counterparts have the potential to do much better, provided they and their current and potential students receive appropriate, additional Federal and State recognition and support.

We have studied the statistics widely available on participation rates across the State and nation, and are acutely aware that location plays a major, unfair role in the likelihood of a capable person participating in, and completing studies at a college of TAFE or university. The more distant one is from a capital city, the less likely is completion of a further education qualification, degree or higher qualification. Similar statistics apply to secondary college students' participation and success. For equal ability and apparent motivation they score lower (hence have lower subsequent opportunities) and are more likely to discontinue education early. These are major lost opportunities for regional and national development, and serious equity issues.

The University of Ballarat has demonstrated that their initiatives to improve participation and completion work well, and their analyses and solutions are highly credible. It is bewildering to us that they are significantly under-supported in their aspirations to extend their initiatives and so improve rural and regional university students' success. It is also a concern that regional university voices, such as those provided by University of Ballarat, seem to fall on deaf ears when it comes to policy and practice in supporting regional students.

*The evidence is clear. We are seeking urgent, direct intervention from the Senate to correct the manifest, significant problems.*

### **Responses to selected Terms of Reference**

We are better placed to provide a view of rural and regional students' participation, as we address "An assessment of the adequacy of Government measures to provide equitable access to secondary and post-secondary education opportunities to students from rural and regional communities attending metropolitan institutions, and metropolitan students attending regional universities or technical and further education (TAFE) colleges". Hence the submissions should be read in that context.

**a. the financial impact on rural and regional students who are attending metropolitan secondary schools, universities or TAFE;**

**c. the implications of current and proposed government measures on prospective students living in rural and regional areas;**

**d. the short- and long-term impact of current and proposed government policies on regional university and TAFE college enrolments; and**

**e. the adequacy of government measures to provide for students who are required to leave home for secondary or post-secondary study**

We are aware that rural and regional students aspiring to attend metropolitan universities must leave home to study, face significant additional costs, are much likely to come from homes or related circumstances with lower disposable income, and are much more likely to defer a place offered to them. We also believe that the take up rate of deferred places is significantly lower than for metro students, and that the overall participation rates are very low compared with metro counterparts. These are significant systemic disadvantages. They usually come on top of related disadvantages related to fewer educational opportunities and resources during their secondary education that have already meant their achieved scores are lower than their abilities would suggest are appropriate.

Identical situations are faced by many regional students who are required to leave home to study at a regional campus.

One of the ways such students could have partially offset these significant, existing disadvantages was to qualify for independent status and receive a youth allowance. Notwithstanding, and as found in the recent Bradley review, these students hold views that the criteria surrounding the Youth Allowance are unreasonably restrictive. An inescapable consequence and conclusion is that the Youth Allowance presently creates a barrier to these students' participation in higher and tertiary education.

Inexplicably in this context, the criteria for Youth Allowances have been tightened even further. The likelihood of rural and regional students qualifying in the present difficult economic circumstances *and those likely to follow in the foreseeable future*, will further disadvantage rural and regional students in their quest for participation.

This is incomprehensible to us and must be reversed.

Furthermore, the current/previous disadvantages must be addressed in meaningful ways, urgently.

We are aware of the metaphorical 'elephant in the room' – the misuse of student support schemes by those who are financially well placed and seek inappropriately to take unreasonable proportions of national (and State) finite budget resources. The refinement of 'filters' or 'gates' in programs designed to exclude such people may work partially to exclude them, yet demonstrably continue to have a seriously damaging impact on worthy and needy potential students from rural and regional locations. And the proposed scholarship arrangements are too few and insufficient in support. Rural and regional students' access and participation continue their long-term trends downwards. It is time to act urgently to provide focused support for these students as the primary goal, free from any collateral damage by filters.

Some will call for some further information to investigate ways of understanding, then addressing this situation. We do not hold that view. The evidence shows there is a present crisis that limits or prevents many rural and regional students' participation, and that existing restrictions in the Youth Allowance contribute directly to this situation. Other disadvantages and barriers also apply and similarly demand reversal.

The Bradley review also confirms that regional Australians are seriously under-represented in higher education and participation rates have fallen in the past five years. We are seeking urgent, direct action to redress the inequities.

#### *Recommendations*

*The Senate report widely on participation rates for rural, regional and metropolitan students, together with the issues that contribute to inequities for rural and regional students' participation in (secondary and) post-secondary education;*

*The Senate, in consultation with appropriately placed education providers and the House of Representatives, act immediately to institute measures that will lead to equity in rural and regional students' participation not later than 2015;*

*The Australian Parliament report biennially on progress towards equity in participation rates for rural and regional students' participation in secondary and post-secondary education;*

*The Senate, in its focus on providing equity for rural and regional students, pay particular attention to the important roles played by regional universities and campuses in helping to meet the equity requirements and seek to support them additionally in this quest.*

#### ***b. the education alternatives for rural and regional students wanting to study in regional areas***

We believe evidence exists to show rural and regional students' options and opportunities - course number and type, and study-styles - are also limited (as well as them facing higher costs and being disadvantaged in pathways to education opportunities). As examples of limits on their alternatives, they have fewer institutions from which to choose, limitations on course availability, limits on regional part time work opportunities, and fewer accommodation options.

In many instances we believe rural and regional students, by virtue of their financial circumstances (at least, and/or potentially cultural, personal safety or family circumstances), only have two effective choices – to study at a regional institution or not pursue post-secondary study at all (or at present). This group includes students considering study at a regional institution other than their nearest one (staying regional for cost or lifestyle-comfort reasons including security, and not being able to choose the nearest because of available course choices)

Some of these students are also more likely to face an additional, significant and under-recognised disadvantage related to study periods away from the home campus. Students who undertake mandatory work experience as part of their study, such as occurs for some trades, health science and teacher education may also have to work for periods out-of-commuting-distance from their principal study location. Hence they are unable to live at home, are required to hold normal campus accommodation, and are required to take additional accommodation for these periods. This is an additional limiting factor for this group of students, and serves to limit alternatives.

### *Recommendations*

*The Senate support additional support and resources, and potentially additional study/course options, for regional secondary and post-secondary education institutions as part of the search for equity in participation and outcomes for rural and regional students*

*The Senate, in consultation with appropriately placed education providers and the House of Representatives, find a means to provide additional resources for rural and regional students who are required to take additional accommodation during their course for essential course components*

**e. the adequacy of government measures to provide for students who are required to leave home for secondary or post-secondary study;**

**g. the impact of government measures and proposals on rural and regional communities**

Additional to what we describe above, there is a young-people and general brain drain from regional Victorian and Australian locations to metropolitan cities. On the former, over 80% of 18- 25 year olds born in Melbourne are still living there. Just over 50% of the same age cohort who were born in regional Victoria continues to live in their own communities. This long term trend does not support the fullest possible contributions of Australia's regions to our national economy. Neither does it contribute positively to the increasing population and infrastructure compromises faced by many of Australia's capital cities, particularly Melbourne and Sydney.

Further, this region's University and regional campuses have a legislated (for the University of Ballarat) or moral obligation to contribute to communities in the region by enriching the lives of people living and working in central and western Victoria. They do this very well to the extent permitted by the available resources. Their roles, particularly for the university based and functioning primarily only in this region, are broader and deeper in their demands and expectations than are those of numerous universities in each of Australia's State capital cities and the ACT. The scope and depth of the needs, and the difficulties associated with the demographics and geography - particularly the educational, social and economic status of residents – are great. These factors result in a situation where the meagre additional resources provided to discharge these responsibilities fall well short of what is required.

The Senate Inquiry is well placed to contribute proactively to this larger, equally important national agenda. By supporting students in regional locations, and regional institutions which are providing financial, social and intellectual capital in and for the regions, the Senate would make significant contributions towards healthier, better balanced, economically viable and more sustainable regional communities.

In light of the inequities for students required to leave home for study, and associated disadvantages for regional communities, the Senate would also do well to be proactive specifically to encourage students to return to regional locations on completion of their tertiary studies. This is a gesture towards reversing current trends which are damaging both to regions and the nation. In looking to do this without additional disadvantage to rural and regional students, at least two factors need to be considered, as well as cost. The first is the benefit students or graduates gain in experiencing broader national and international locations, and the second is to ensure there are meaningful and rewarding roles for them to undertake in their rural or regional location. Examples of programs that may meet these conditions include:

A graduate who returns to a regional location within a small number of years of graduation would be exempt from further HECS debt repayments; and/or

A graduate who returns to a regional location and establishes an independent business is offered targeted additional business development support to achieve early financial viability.

*Recommendations:*

*The Senate take additional measures to those identified above in (b) to provide support and incentives for rural, regional and metropolitan students to locate to regional secondary and post-secondary education institutions;*

*The Senate take steps to ensure regionally based universities<sup>1</sup> are provided with additional resources in recognition of their additional, unsupported costs of operating in their region, and/or their demonstrated contributions to social, economic and intellectual capital in and for Australia's regions; and*

*The Senate investigate and implement appropriate incentives for graduates from rural and regional home locations to return a regional location to undertake priority economic or social enterprises within a small number of years of graduation.*

***f. the educational needs of rural and regional students***

This is largely covered above in other commentary.

We welcome the Senate's Inquiry, particularly its capacity to take action that will at least ameliorate, and preferably urgently 'fix' the rural and regional student access, participation and equity issues. This urgent request is made in the knowledge that these issues have been well known, yet not acted on comprehensively, for decades.

We urge the Inquiry to be responsive and decisive in seeking and taking action that will lead to early positive outcomes. Achieving equitable participation and outcomes be applauded, and will provide a lasting positive legacy for the nation.

Committee for Ballarat would be happy to speak further to these issues if required, including in person if that would help elaborate the issues we have raised

Doug Lloyd, CEO

12<sup>th</sup> August 2009

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<sup>1</sup> Including regional campuses of metropolitan-based universities where it is demonstrated that the resources provided are committed in full directly to benefit the regional campuses on the regional site rather than at metropolitan centre(s)