

SPERA Submission to the Senate Inquiry into Rural and Regional Access to Secondary and Tertiary Education Opportunities

Introduction

In setting the context for this submission, SPERA wishes to make two significant points.

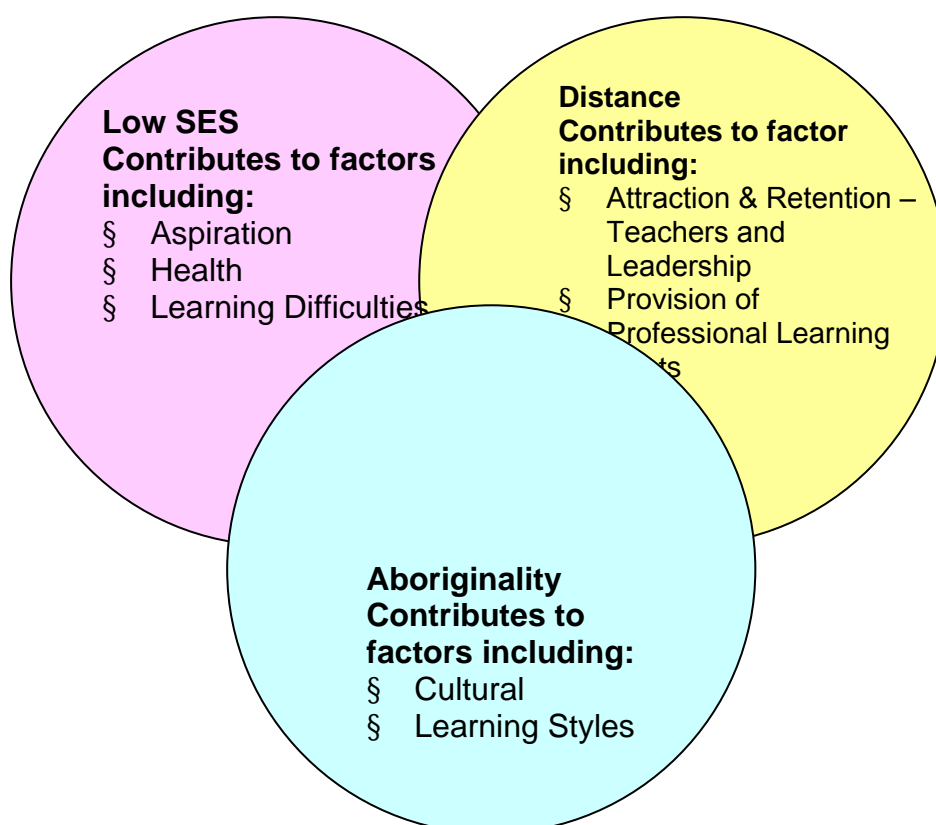
First, education policy is generally developed by bureaucracies in large metropolitan centres with little thought as to how implementation will impact in regional and rural settings. SPERA agrees with the argument put forward by Wallace and Boylan (2007) that rural and regional education would benefit greatly if policy makers applied “rural lens” during the development process.

In doing this, governments and providers need to acknowledge that the provision of education to non-metropolitan locations is a specialist service in the same way that there is a growing recognition of rural medicine and health provision being a unique service and requiring its own focus and processes.

SPERA believes that the key factor contributing to making rural education different from urban education is geographic, and more specifically the need to deal with a range of challenges, some real others perceived, created by distance. While the impact of the *tyranny of distance* on Australian society has been well explained by Blainey (2001, Edition 21) and others, its significance is not yet fully understood by policy makers. Distance has created a significant divide in Australia between metropolitan Australia and rural Australia – a divide that is ever increasing and resulting in inequalities that should not exist in a first world economy.

While SPERA sees distance as a very significant factor affecting the challenges faced by rural and regional education, the Society also acknowledges that low economic status and Aboriginality impact on non-metropolitan education. The Venn diagram below illustrates the interplay between all three factors. A holistic approach is needed to address these challenges.

Significant Factors Contributing to Educational Disadvantage in Rural and Regional Australia.



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Second, SPERA believes that the sustainability of a strong and prosperous Australia depends on the Nation having strong and viable rural communities. Rural and regional areas provide Australia with the resources that underpin the economy and wealth of the Nation. As the impact of climate change intensifies and issues such as securing food supply become increasingly important, so will the importance of sustainable rural and regional communities. SPERA is of the firm belief that sustainable rural communities are built on a foundation of quality education that, in the main, is delivered locally.

SPERA acknowledges the response from the Hon Julia Gillard MP, Deputy Prime Minister, concerning the changes to the Youth Allowance announced in the 2009-2010 Budget. However, while the factors of low socio-economic and Aboriginality are addressed, the significance of distance as a determinant of educational disadvantage in regional and remote education has not been acknowledged.

The Financial Impact on Rural and Regional Students Who Are Attending Metropolitan Secondary Schools, Universities or TAFE

The financial impact on rural and regional students and their families associated with them attending metropolitan universities or TAFE colleges is well documented in research literature (Godden, 2007). Furthermore, this financial impact is the main contributing factor in the underrepresentation of the rural population in higher education (e.g. HREOC, 2000; Alston & Kent, 2006; Godden, 2005).

For a significant proportion of rural and regional students intending to participate in higher education, distance necessitates relocation/living away from home as the only option. This places a significant cost burden on students and their families associated with living away from home. Accommodation, food and travel costs being the three most significant cost pressures on top of already expensive university fees and expenditure on books and other resources needed for successful competition in higher education.

Many families cannot afford this expense. Students often feel considerable guilt at having to expose their parents to these cost burdens. The net result is that many students from rural and remote Australia just give up the aspiration for higher education. This inequality impacts not only on the long-term quality of the lives of the student but also on the nation in terms of lost intellectual potential. In other instances students seek employment to offset costs. Invariably, the impact of lengthy hours of work contributes to students opting to defer or withdraw from tertiary education.

SPERA is of the strong opinion that many of these potential higher education students do not fall into the classification of low economic status. SPERA believes the Commonwealth Government has a responsibility to ensure that inequalities created by distance are addressed and that the growing divide between the metropolitan haves and the rural and regional have-nots in terms of education, including access to higher education, be addressed.

SPERA is not convinced that the measures announced by Minister for Education, Hon Julia Gillard, on 12 May 2009 in relation to the Youth Allowance go far enough in addressing the inequalities experienced by rural and regional students caused by distance. In spite of the changes, the financial impact on rural and regional students who must leave home to attend universities or TAFE in metropolitan or large regional

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centres remains significant.

The Education Alternatives for Rural and Regional Students Wanting To Study In Regional Areas

Australia has a long and proud tradition and record in distance education delivery within schools and higher education sectors. In higher education universities such as the University of New England have been industry leaders in distance education and provided the inspiration for others to follow. In the school sector, Australian correspondence schools and Schools of the Air have been world leaders in distance education. Both the school and higher education sectors are building on this sound and successful tradition with their involvement in many creative and innovative on-line and flexible delivery practices. This was recently exemplified at SPERA's 25th National Conference at Flinders University in papers presented by Prof N. Anderson (*Web 2.0 the expansion of Broadband to Rural and Remote Australia and the Impact of ICT Fuelled Participatory Culture*); Prof J Pegg & Dr C Reading (*Embedding ICT in Learning: Power in Rural Partnerships*); (A McKerral; (*PING: An on-line music education project*); Dr K Twyford, A Anderson & D Smyth (*Interactive Distance le-Learning for Isolated Communities: VET Delivery in NSW*); and B Devlin & A Hutchinson (*Interactive Distance Learning in Real Time for one Student with Hearing Impairment: A Case Study*). There is no doubt that ongoing development in the use of Information Communication Technology (ICT) will provide useful education alternatives for rural and regional students wanting to study in regional areas.

SPERA believes, however, that caution needs to be applied as to how ICT is used. The use of ICT as a means of reducing the costs associated with regional and rural provision and as a means to "plug the gaps" created by poor policy development and planning (e.g. the inability of systems and sectors to attract and retain quality staff) will only further marginalise rural communities. Local delivery in a face-to-face on campus setting, enhanced by flexible delivery should remain a central platform of provision models in both the school and higher education sectors. In relation to higher education, and where face-to-face and campus situations need to be enhanced, this does not necessarily mean significant additional capital works programs. Many rural and regional TAFE facilities have excess capacity in their infrastructure that could be used to enhance the provision of higher education in these locations. The fostering of more co-located TAFE and higher education facilities in non-metropolitan locations would be a significant step forward in promoting an environment for better strategic approaches to address rural and regional workforce issues and the development of pathways between the trades and professions.

SPERA believes that maximising the potential of co-located VET and higher education facilities in rural and regional locations would assist in the process of bring the two sectors closer together as recommended in the Bradley Report (2008).

SPERA believes that while the greater use of co-located facilities has application across Australia, the greatest potential for enhanced development of this concept is in South Australia and Western Australia, both of which have no regional universities.

Within these co-located facilities state of the art online and flexible delivery strategies should be employed to enhance depth and breadth of the courses and units offered. Collaboration between universities should also be a feature of delivery to these co-located facilities.

The Implications of Current and Proposed Government Measures On Prospective Students Living In Rural and Regional Areas

SPERA welcomes the general directions articulated by Professor Bradley in the *Review of Australian Higher Education* (Bradley Report) and many of the subsequent announcements made by the Commonwealth Government in response to the Review. This is particularly so in terms of those changes directed at increasing participation and attainment rates by aboriginal students and those experiencing economic hardship. As stated above, however, SPERA believes these changes do not go far enough in terms of supporting those disadvantaged by distance and location.

SPERA is of the opinion that all rural students who have left home to participate in full time higher education, including TAFE, in metropolitan or large regional locations be considered as financially independent and be eligible for the full Youth Allowance. In addition, all students who fit this category should be provided with the new "Relocation Scholarship" of \$4000 in the first year of study and \$1000 each following year.

The level of the Youth Allowance and Relocation Scholarships could be further increased beyond the standard rates if students studied in professions and trades that are in demand across rural and regional Australia, for example teachers, medical professionals, agricultural scientists and farm related trades and occupations. Payment of benefits over and above the standard Youth Allowance and Relocation Scholarship would be dependant on students agreeing to work in rural locations on graduation for a time equivalent to the length of their higher education course of study.

As a starting point, SPERA believes that this over and above payment be an additional 25% of the Youth Allowance and 25% of the Relocation Scholarship.

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

SPERA believes that while measures provided by the Government for students who must leave home for secondary or post-secondary study need to be enhanced, the focus on local provision, including the development of new and innovative delivery models must be intensified. As stated above, a sustainable rural and regional Australia depends on a foundation of quality education that is, in the main, provided locally.

The Educational Needs of Rural and Regional Students

While the focus of this submission is on higher education, SPERA welcomes the opportunity under this Term of Reference to highlight 5 significant needs that must be addressed in a partnership arrangement between the state and commonwealth governments to create more equitable opportunities for students in rural and regional Australia.

1. The attraction and retention of quality teachers

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2. The attraction and retention of quality educational leaders
3. The provision of quality professional learning to suit the needs of rural and regional teachers across Australia
4. The development of new delivery models to better suit Australia's diverse and changing regional and rural communities
5. A national strategic action plan that articulates the steps that will be taken over the next five years to address the educational needs of rural and regional students across Australia.

The attraction and retention of quality teachers

While factors such as low socio economic status impact on student performance levels the quality of teaching and learning and therefore the quality of teachers is an even greater determining factor impacting on student outcomes. The issues associated with the attraction and retention of quality teacher in rural and regional Australia is well documented in research literature (e.g. Roberts, 2004 & Lyons, et al, 2006).

The work of SiMERR is seminal in providing quantitative evidence on the link between teacher quality and student performance and a way forward in relation to the attraction and retention of quality teachers in regional and rural Australia. It is now three years since the release of SiMERR's findings and not one of the 23 recommendations has been implemented directly or in an ongoing way.

SPERA believes the recommendations listed in the SiMERR National Survey related to; attraction and retention of teachers for rural schools, support for rural teachers, and pre-service preparation for rural teaching, be implemented.

The attraction and retention of quality educational leaders

As is the case for many professions, there is a critical shortage of educational leadership across regional and rural Australia

SPERA believes the recommendations listed in the SiMERR National Survey related to attracting and retaining rural education leaders need to be implemented.

The provision of quality professional learning to suit the needs of rural and regional teachers across Australia

As has been found in the health professions, the provision of professional learning to rural educators needs to be specifically designed to cater for their unique needs

SPERA believes the recommendations listed in the SiMERR related to; support for rural teachers, induction/orientation of teachers new to a rural area, continuing professional development and professional engagement be implemented.

The development of new delivery models to better suit Australia's diverse and changing regional and rural communities

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Systems and sectors often have a “one size fits all” approach to delivery models. SPERA acknowledges, however, that there is a great deal of innovative working taking place across rural and regional Australia exploring the possibilities of more effective delivery models. These include such approaches as ‘clustering of schools

A national strategic action plan that articulates the steps that will be taken over the next five years to address the educational needs of rural and regional students across Australia.

Other Related Matters

The issues impacting on rural and regional education have been articulated in an evidence-based way in many places. Based on this evidence, numerous solutions-focused strategies have also been put forward. What is needed is a coordinated and strategic approach with a focus on action and the accompanying action research to monitor progress and ensure ongoing improvement.

Failure to address Australia’s rural and regional needs in a holistic and co-ordinated way will continue to see participation and attainment rates for rural and remote students remain low.

SPERA

The Society for the Provision of Education in Rural Australia incorporated (SPERA) links people with a diverse range of interests in education and training to promote the development of rural Australia by:

- § promoting a positive view of education and training in rural areas and encouraging innovation and initiative in the provision of rural services;
- § supporting and encouraging rural communities and educators to work towards the provision of quality education and training; and
- § providing a framework for the sharing of concerns, issues and experiences relating to education and training in rural areas.

SPERA emerged from a New South Wales in-service activity organised by Marie Dale in 1984. The activity resulted in the organisation and facilitation of a national conference in rural education at the University of New England in Armidale, New South Wales, in 1985. At that conference SPERA was endorsed as a national organisation with Marie Dale as the foundation president.

Since its formation SPERA has focused on advancing the education and training opportunities for all people in rural Australia by addressing five key goals including:

- § promoting state and regional delivery systems which bring about efficient and effective education and training for people in rural areas;
- § encouraging both the collection and sharing of relevant information on the provision of education and training in rural areas;
- § conducting an annual national conference to exchange ideas and information about education and training in rural education;
- § servicing as a national advocate representing rural education and training; and
- § sponsoring the annual Australian Rural Education Award.

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For a small organisation SPERA has achieved these goals effectively throughout the years. This has been possible through the support of its members and especially those who take on executive roles and support the organisation through donations and sponsorship. Those who support our annual national conference also play an important part in the success of SPERA.

Despite SPERA's achievements it needs maintaining its strong focus on meeting the ever increasing challenges facing rural. Conferences, the *Education in Rural Australia* journal, newsletters and the newly developed website have provided a wealth of ideas and ways forward for SPERA. As recently as 2009 SPERA initiated an exciting new program that invited pre-service/novice teachers across Australia to take up SPERA membership at no cost. This must now be progressed to the next step to foster an interactive network of support that will be a valuable tool for pre-service educators and novice teachers who take up positions in rural and remote locations. This vital step will ensure that our emerging educators are supported by a recognised professional association that collaborates widely to provide quality and excellence across Australia.

Other opportunities SPERA aims to embrace focus on establishing partnerships with other national and state organisations, and lobbying the Federal Government to acknowledge the skills educators require to address the unique issues, challenges and needs of rural students and the wider communities in which they live.

Conclusion

SPERA welcomes this opportunity to provide the Senate Inquiry with this information and is willing to provide more specific details on request.

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