

Submission to

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

**Prepared by Chee Lai (President) on behalf of
Curtin University Student Guild**

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Background

Curtin University has over 30,000 students enrolled in Western Australia located on the main Bentley campus, throughout Perth and at 8 regional campuses. These regional campuses include the Muresk agricultural campus and Kalgoorlie's Western Australian School of Mines. As the elected student representative body, the Curtin Student Guild represents the rights and interests of all Curtin students. This submission will focus on post-secondary education opportunities for regional students attending metropolitan institutions, as well as metropolitan students attending regional universities. It specifically addresses terms of reference A, B, C, D and G.

Recommendations

- 1)** That the value of Relocation Scholarships increased to reflect the very high costs of relocation and housing for rural and regional students.
- 2)** That relocation Scholarships should be offered to ALL rural and regional students forced to relocate to study, rather than just those who already receive income support.
- 3)** That the loading placed on students enrolled at regional institutions be increased to more adequately reflect the increased costs of offering these services, and to encourage universities to better promote and expand on their regional programs.
- 4)** That the proposed changes to eligibility requirements for a student to work for independence be scrapped, or at the very least be introduced with a grace period so as not to disadvantage the thousands of rural and regional students who have already delayed their studies.
- 5)** That all students forced to relocate from a rural or regional area to study their course of choice who are living independently should be deemed to have gained independence, regardless of parental income or whether they have completed the current work requirements.
- 6)** That the Government abandons any plans to adopt a voucher system for student enrolments, as it will be extremely disadvantageous to rural and regional campuses and communities.

Terms of Reference Addressed

A. The financial impact on rural and regional students who are attending metropolitan secondary schools, universities or TAFE.

Students moving from regional and rural areas to study at Curtin suffer a number of financial disadvantages compared to their city-based counterparts. Housing and relocation issues are the most pressing of these, with on-campus housing at Curtin at capacity every year, with local, rural and international students all competing for places.

The proposed Relocation Scholarships will provide some assistance, but make little difference when a student moving to Perth can expect to spend more than \$20,000 a year on living costs¹. Furthermore, the requirement that students first qualify for income support to receive a Scholarship will prevent many students from receiving much needed assistance at the start of their degrees when they are most vulnerable. These Scholarships should be extended to all rural and regional students who are forced to relocate for their studies.

B. The education alternatives for rural and regional students wanting to study in regional areas.

Rural and regional students are currently faced with few options if they want to study in regional areas, with numerous small campuses offering shared facilities and no true University 'experience'. Just last year Curtin attempted to close all first year unit's at its Kalgoorlie campus for this year, with the removal of second year units by 2010². Furthermore, the Muresk campus is likely to close due to financial reasons unless enrolments double by next year³.

So while there are currently very limited options for students, these few options are rapidly shrinking. It makes no sense to have a publicly stated policy to attract more rural and regional students while universities are threatening to close regional campuses as they are not financially viable.

The Curtin Student Guild, the Kalgoorlie Student Guild and the Muresk Student Guild call upon Curtin University to respect student's wishes and rights to study at or nearby their home towns, and urge the Government to provide adequate funding to subsidise regional enrolments so that Universities can run regional campuses without suffering financial hardship for doing so.

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

The proposed amendments to student income support greatly disadvantage students living in rural and regional areas. These students often have no choice but to move away from home to a larger city or regional area, but are not adequately supported in this move. The proposal to tighten the

¹ Big expense for students, Kalgoorlie Miner, 12/01/2008, Garrett Mundy

² Mine school's out despite boom, The Australian, 20/06/2008, Paige Taylor

³ ABC North West WA (Karratha), 12:30 News, 05/08/2009 12:33PM Compere: Newsreader

eligibility criteria for independence, forcing students to work for at least 30 hours a week for at least 18 months, will have a devastating impact for those students from rural and regional areas who often take a gap year to earn independence before moving to a city to study.

Increasing of the threshold for the parental income test, while commendable, will not help the many rural and regional students whose parents are still said to be earning a higher income, but cannot or do not support their children when they move away from home. Any student who is forced to move away from their home and their family to study is clearly living independently, and therefore should be treated and supported as such by the government.

D. The short- and long-term impact of current and proposed government policies on regional university and TAFE college enrolments.

The proposed Government policies regarding higher education will have a disastrous effect on regional university enrolments. The proposed voucher system allowing institutions to enrol as many students as they want in courses with uncapped places will be especially harmful. This system will see smaller and regional universities forced to cut back and close due to students being tempted to favour larger, more popular courses at larger universities. These more popular courses, such as law and commerce, will almost primarily be based at large, metropolitan universities and will come at the cost of smaller, more costly and less demand-driven courses that regional universities specialise in.

Already Curtin has moved its Agribusiness units from Muresk to the Curtin Business School in Bentley. This trend is going to increase at a very rapid rate with the introduction of the voucher system, and it will be to the detriment of regional universities and regional students.

G. The impact of government measures and proposals on rural and regional communities.

Regional universities contribute greatly to their communities, both through increased populations, employment and stimulation of local economies^{4, 5}. As already demonstrated, a lack of support and subsidies for regional student enrolments is placing pressure on regional campuses to close. When the voucher system fully comes into effect these pressures will be magnified further, and will certainly cause regional campuses to close, forcing more students and their families to incur greater expenses and inconvenience.

The flow-on effect of these closures will be to reduce employment and spending in regional communities that naturally arises from the presence of a university campus, as well as a flood of young, talented students deserting rural and regional areas in favour of major cities. This will have a devastating effect on all of those communities involved.

⁴ Local impact, broad appeal, Campus Review, 07/07/2009, Ben Power

⁵ More support for Muresk, Coutryman, 06/08/2009