

Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committee on Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Institute Council Secretariat
Institute Office
Hindman Street
PO Box 528
Port Macquarie NSW 2444
Phone: (02) 6586 2219
Fax (02) 6586 2344
www.nci.tafensw.edu.au

Dear Sir/Madam

The North Coast TAFE Institute Council welcomes the opportunity to provide input to the *Senate Inquiry into Rural & Regional Access to Secondary and Tertiary Education*.

The Council is an independent advisory body for the planning and delivery of TAFE services in the North Coast and assists North Coast TAFE to align its services with current and emerging skill needs of industries, communities, disadvantaged groups and other education sectors and other stakeholders in the region.

The Council comprises 13 industry and community representatives from the North Coast region and the Institute Director as an ex-officio member. Members are appointed by the NSW Minister for Education and Training and Cabinet.

Measures announced in the Federal budget in support of the Government's *Transforming Higher Education* statement address several challenges of vital importance to improving access to tertiary education services for low SES students and rural and regional students and communities. In particular, there is welcome support for individual universities' efforts to extend and improve their services in regional Australia, and an acknowledgement that TAFE partnerships need to be part of these efforts.

More attention, however, needs to be given to the potential for regional TAFE institutes to lead in these efforts, as

- a provider of vocational education and training (VET) and skills development,
- a vital part of the broader tertiary education sector and
- a sector which has existing physical and human capital right across regional footprints that the Federal government could leverage more effectively for the benefit of local people.

For this reason our submission recommends that special Federal funding be allocated for multi-party collaborations. Recent announcements by the Federal Govt, in response to the Bradley review, flagged this idea but have made the funding available only to universities which, naturally, will link their proposals to their institutional ambitions. What we would propose is a fund that is managed independently by, say, RDA or – less radically – by the regional TAFE Institute with regionally determined performance indicators – on the grounds that both these bodies have a greater interest in bringing to a region the diverse capabilities of multiple higher education providers.

Equitable access to tertiary education, whether in TAFE or university, should be an entitlement for all Australians. However this is not the case in rural and regional areas because of limited and dispersed educational infrastructure, sparse public transport services and the high financial, personal and social costs of moving away from home to study.

Our attached submission notes that a student who is compelled to move away to study pays a "surcharge" for their qualification, and the need to meet this cost can significantly compromise access and retention in tertiary study, both for those entitled to a Government allowance and those who don't qualify for assistance at all. For this reason we recommend the extension of the "basic boarding allowance" currently provided to isolated school students to all tertiary students who can demonstrate a need to move away to undertake their TAFE or university course.

Our submission also identifies ways to reduce the need to move away by: providing on-campus personalised

support for distance and online students (in universities and TAFE) through the national network of some 1400 TAFE campuses & centres; by investing in widely distributed e-learning infrastructure and capabilities in all rural & regional TAFE campuses; and, by supporting locally responsive TAFE/university collaboration in educational delivery and joint facilities development to broaden on-campus tertiary education offerings in regional areas.

Uncertain and inequitable access to funding can be a barrier to these collaborative local solutions, and can reduce the regional responsiveness of education providers, especially in small rural communities that are hundred or more kilometres from the nearest university campus and where TAFE is the only tertiary education provider. Therefore our submission recommends that VET funding mechanisms include provision for longer term funding arrangements for TAFE institutes to support continuity of provision in small centres and more certainty in offerings of full-time pre-vocational and diploma programs.

On behalf of the Council, I welcome the opportunity for this input to the Inquiry and would be pleased to discuss these matters further. I can be contacted on 0400 441 976.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Warren Grimshaw', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Warren Grimshaw AM
Chair
North Coast TAFE Institute Council
7 August 2009

North Coast TAFE Institute Council

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

- **Supporting Those Who Need to Move Away to Study**

Financial impacts – and adequacy of government measures to provide – for students who are required to leave home for secondary or post-secondary study; (including rural and regional students attending metropolitan secondary schools, universities or TAFE)

(Terms of Reference A, C and E)

As Government cannot provide the necessary educational infrastructure in all regional and rural communities, specific measures are needed to compensate, at least in part, for extra costs when students are compelled to move away from home for study. This measure is reflected in the rural & isolated students' allowance administered by Centrelink, which is a key element in Australia's universal access to compulsory school education.

Extending the same universal entitlement to those who need to move away from home for post-compulsory tertiary study (university or TAFE) may be lever to help achieve COAG's ambitious targets for VET and higher education participation. It may also be a lever – alongside others canvassed over – to change the trend highlighted in *Bradley Review of Higher Education* for rural and regional participation in tertiary programs to remain in an unacceptably low and "flat-line" mode for the past decade

Based on information provided by university accommodation services, rural and regional students needing to move to metropolitan areas for tertiary study face extra costs of \$17,000- \$20,000 per-annum in re-location, accommodation and basic subsistence. Lower accommodation costs slightly reduce this impost (\$14,000 - \$17,000 pa) for students moving to study in another regional centre

Those eligible for Youth Allowance, Abstudy and Austudy, and the additional payments for re-location and accommodation expenses that are tied to them, get some relief. The 09/10 budget included welcome equity measures to improve access to these allowances and increase them for the most-needy, by shifting some responsibility back to those families who can afford to continue paying a living allowance to their full-time student children.

However, there has been much criticism in regional communities of changes to the Youth Allowance independent status eligibility rules that have adversely affected students who are compelled to leave home for tertiary study (and whose family income makes them ineligible for dependant Youth Allowance). Not only do they miss out on the fortnightly allowance but they can no longer get any relief from the unavoidable extra relocation and accommodation costs quantified above. This also affects students needing to move to the country from a metropolitan area to complete a specialist tertiary qualification that they can't access because of extremely high demand and entry scores, or because it is not available locally.

In effect a student who must move away from home pays a "surcharge" for their qualification, and must do more considerably more paid work, either before starting or during their tertiary study, to pay that extra cost. This surcharge can range from extra \$15,000 for a one year TAFE certificate completed in a regional centre, to \$100,000 for a 5 year degree completed at a metropolitan university. The need to meet this cost can significantly compromise entry, success and retention in tertiary study, both for those on a Government allowance, and those who don't receive accommodation assistance at all. This "surcharge" also impacts disproportionately on rural and regional students with limited or no local higher education options.

Recommendation:

- **That students who demonstrate a need to move away to access tertiary study not available within feasible daily travelling distance of the family home, receive an allowance similar to the non means-tested "basic boarding allowance" provided to isolated rural students compelled to move away from home to attend school (under that scheme additional means-tested benefits are paid to those in need).**

- **Educational needs and alternatives for rural and regional students wanting to study in rural and regional areas and measures to increase tertiary education participation in those areas**

(Terms of Reference D, F, G and H)

TAFE institutes are the largest and leading provider of VET and skills development services to industries, communities and individuals in rural and regional areas. Government policies and funding programs need to recognise and invest in the social and economic value of a well-supported, regionally responsive TAFE system.

There is also a need to increase the capability of regional TAFE institutes (through investment in dispersed infrastructure and student places) to provide students with a wider range of higher level and specialist TAFE qualifications (many of which are only offered in metropolitan areas). This in turn will support more pathways from TAFE to universities.

The financial, social and cultural disincentives to rural and regional people moving away from home to undertake TAFE or university study are significant and this is particularly the case for low SES and Indigenous Australians living in these areas. It is therefore not surprising that low rates of tertiary education participation in rural and regional areas were highlighted for attention in the Bradley Review and the Government's response, *Transforming Australia's Higher Education System*.

Among the Government's responses was a \$2 million grant to support the Review's recommendation for a joint Southern Cross University/Charles Sturt University feasibility study for a "new national university for regional Australia". The recent announcement that the feasibility study is on-hold is perhaps not surprising, considering the complexities and challenges of providing high quality, responsive post-school education services for the diverse needs of our regional communities.

The notion of a single national university for regional Australia was always going to rely on a distance education model and, if this was the answer, we wouldn't have seen the proportion of rural and regional students remain static at the same time that distance and online options were rapidly expanding. There is much evidence of low completion rates in distance education and that many learners need or prefer on-campus or mixed-mode programs, especially for their first post-school qualification. Similarly the much vaunted Victorian model of dual sector universities may not translate as a nation-wide model that meets the needs of more geographically dispersed states and regions.

Put simply, in regional Australia space and place matter. This calls for locally designed and driven models of tertiary education provision. In rural and regional communities, geography, transport networks, limited and dispersed university campuses and "thin" higher education markets combine to exacerbate all of the others barriers that limit university aspiration, participation and completion in lower SES communities generally.

Several initiatives announced in *Transforming Australia's Higher Education System* paper and the Federal budget provide welcome support for individual universities' efforts to extend and improve their services in regional Australia. However, as the following case study illustrates, this institutional approach is largely constrained by the business goals of individual universities, often struggling with the extra costs of serving communities at some distance from their main campus or competing unproductively with other universities and TAFE in thin regional markets, to the detriment of the communities they all aim to serve:

Case Study:

A recent meeting of a community-based collaborative Education & Skills Forum in the North Coast of NSW heard of three separate local tertiary education facilities developments in their large regional centre, within a few kilometres of each other, involving four universities and TAFE. Members welcomed the commitment and confidence shown by each of the institutions in growing their local presence, noting however that two of the developments focussed only on supporting students undertaking distance education or rural clinical placements. This led to discussion on whether this fast-growing regional centre's aspiration to have a tertiary education campus equivalent to those of comparable centres in NSW – which would serve a local population of 72,000 and a further 75,000 in the adjacent LGAs – might be realised through a more integrated, collaborative approach.

TAFE can be a catalyst for such collaborative efforts as it has the educational expertise, reach and infrastructure required to collaborate effectively with universities to expand higher education provision on the ground in regional Australia. This could be through a variety of arrangements including:

- TAFE being funded to provide local campus-based support services and a campus experience for those

distance and online university students needing more personalised, face-to-face and peer support to stay with and succeed in their studies.

(Under this approach, university students could access personalised support through some 1400 TAFE campuses/centres spread across the country, rather than be limited to only 140 university campuses/centres. In North Coast TAFE those who proceed from a TAFE Diploma or TAFE Tertiary Preparation Program to a distance degree often enrol in TAFE for this support, with the majority of costs being absorbed within TAFE's recurrent funding. With access to higher education funding, this service could be actively promoted and expanded to more students and lead to increased completions)

- Extending third party access at TAFE campuses for universities, as a cost-effective alternative to funding separate regional access centres – or as an interim measure providing a visible campus presence whilst the universities and communities build sufficient demand to justify a standalone campus

(The North Coast TAFE/University of Newcastle Partnership in Port Macquarie is one example of how this approach can go beyond a "university access centre" approach to gradually transform a TAFE Campus to become an integrated dual sector campus).

- Several universities and TAFE working together to jointly plan and fund facilities and offerings to increase on-campus tertiary education provision in one or more major centres

(The Geraldton Education Centre in WA is one example of this approach).

- Dual offers, where universities deliver (and/or auspice TAFE to deliver) university subjects alongside or end-on with a campus-based TAFE diploma program, so that students can qualify for a degree without leaving their community. These models could be offered on-campus or via online or distance modes or a combination of these.

(e.g. in NSW Charles Sturt University and Wollongong University have partnered with their local TAFE institutes in dual offer degree programs)

- Universities engaging with TAFE, schools, industries and communities on joint approaches to address identity and aspiration barriers to accessing higher level VET and tertiary education in areas of regional skill shortage.

(For example, there is strong need to support and promote programs such as the Career Link Program which operates in Great Lakes, Clarence Valley and several other areas and is about retaining students to HSC level whilst securing vocational skills, TAFE qualifications, structured work placements and real job prospects. For some Career Link programs (e.g. aged care and child care) an alternative non-UAI pathway to a degree has been negotiated with some universities. This recognises that an HSC program combining school study, a TAFE qualification and regular structured work experience can be equal to a more academic HSC program in terms of encouraging young people to aspire to, and prepare for, university study and professional work).

- Coordinated information via a website and joint promotions for school leavers and mature learners showing ways to start or complete a degree within their local region – including on-campus options; supported distance learning and TAFE/university articulation; dual offers or co-enrolment ; and, for those who must move away, information on regional & rural access schemes

Recommendation:

That the Review highlight the need to recognise and invest in the social and economic value of a well-supported, regionally responsive TAFE system.

That a special Federal funding program be established to provide multi-party facilitation capability, infrastructure and Commonwealth supported places funding to increase the capability of regional TAFE institutes to provide students with a wider range of higher level VET and specialist qualifications, especially in areas of regional skill needs and that support the offering of TAFE/university pathways at regional campuses.

That be more flexibility is provided in access to higher education structural adjustment and access & equity funding, so that TAFE, local government and RDA, as well as individual universities, can access funding to support collaborative, placed-based solutions for currently under-serviced communities

• Tertiary Education Funding *(Terms of Reference D, G and H)*

Uncertain and inequitable access to funding can be a barrier to some of the collaborative local solutions described above, and can compromise TAFE's ability to meet the needs of rural and regional communities (where TAFE is often the only tertiary education provider).

With greater contestability, short-term tendering and an emphasis on apprenticeships & traineeships funding, TAFE's ability to meet the needs of small rural towns and provide expensive full-time pre-vocational and diploma programs has been diminished. In regional areas, this can make it more difficult for those moving from secondary schooling to further education in a vocational area, and for regional TAFE campuses to offer a range of diploma programs each year with any certainty.

More flexible access is needed to the higher education funding pools provided for structural adjustment, regional engagement, collaboration and access & equity initiatives, not just to universities. These funds should be equally available to TAFE institutes, which are often more entrepreneurial, more embedded in the region, and more connected to the low SES groups whose aspirations need to be built and supported. Alternatively, funding could be directed to a community group such as local government or Regional Development Australia that can auspice collaborative arrangements.

There are similar issues in infrastructure funding. Disappointingly, North Coast TAFE's recent bids for EIF and TIIFT funding to grow local accessibility through technology and dispersed infrastructure improvements throughout the region were unsuccessful. Many successful bids went to large buildings in big cities and single towns. Whilst the successful proponents no doubt presented worthy cases, single institution bids and sector-specific government funding programs need to be supplemented by more regionally-responsive and flexible funding models that give priority to:

- collaborative, placed-based solutions that address the needs of currently under-serviced communities
- ensuring best use and regular updating of existing educational infrastructure in rural and regional areas
- infrastructure bids that demonstrate a commitment to building 'linked but distributed' capacity across an entire region
- investing in e-learning technologies as well as "bricks and mortar"
- support regional TAFE institutes and universities to partner with bus companies and their communities to improve out-of-school-hours transport services to campuses

Recommendations:

That more flexible, regionally responsive funding models be introduced that provide for:

- **longer term funding arrangements for TAFE institutes to support continuity of provision in small centres and more certainty in offerings of full-time pre-vocational and diploma programs.**
- **access to the higher education structural adjustment and access & equity funding, so that TAFE, local government and RDA, as well as individual universities, can access funding to support collaborative, placed-based solutions for currently under-served communities**
- **ensuring best use and regular updating of existing educational infrastructure**
- **a significant investment in e-learning technologies at all regional & rural TAFE campuses**
- **support regional TAFE institutes and universities to partner with bus companies and their communities to improve out-of-school-hours transport services to campuses**