

SOUTHERN CROSS UNIVERSITY

Submission to Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Committee Inquiry

into

Rural and regional access to secondary and tertiary education opportunities

On 16 June 2009, the Senate referred the following matter to the Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee for inquiry and report by 29 October 2009:

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, with particular reference to:

- a. the financial impact on rural and regional students who are attending metropolitan secondary schools, universities or TAFE;*
- b. the education alternatives for rural and regional students wanting to study in regional areas;*
- 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;*
- e. the adequacy of government measures to provide for students who are required to leave home for secondary or post-secondary study;*
- f. the educational needs of rural and regional students;*
- g. the impact of government measures and proposals on rural and regional communities; and*
- h. other related matters.*

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Participation in tertiary education by students from regional Australia

The 2006 census confirms previous studies which show that participation rates in higher education are substantially lower in regional areas than in the capital cities.

The census data show a considerable gap between regional and metropolitan areas in the proportion of higher education students in the population. Young regional Australians (15-24) are about half as likely as those in metropolitan areas to be attending university. The participation gap narrows with older age groups. In the 35-39 age group, regional residents are 75% as likely to be attending university as their metropolitan counterparts.

NSW has a more evenly distributed level of university participation than other states: in the 20-24 age group regional residents in NSW are two-thirds as likely to attend university as metropolitan

residents. Victoria has high levels of city based university participation but low to average regional participation. SA and WA have very low higher education participation rates among younger age groups in regional areas. This is likely to reflect the fact that younger people in regional areas of those States have few options other than moving to the city if they wish to attend university.

University entry stands out as a key driver for young people who decide to move to the city. As the cohort ages, those in their early 20s who remain at university, or who entered university later, are more evenly divided between a regional and a metropolitan residence.

The picture from all data sources is very clear:

- Young people from regional areas move away to metropolitan regions, especially the capital cities, in substantial numbers to attend university
- There is much less movement in the other direction
- There is much less movement away from the regions by students in the VET sector or in employment.

In addition, a DETYA study concluded that in metropolitan areas economic and education factors are very strong explainers of participation differences with access to a campus a relatively minor issue. In non-metropolitan areas access to a campus was a more important influence on participation in higher education, alongside family resources and education and other larger unexplained factor(s).

Current patterns of provision

For this analysis students have been divided into four groups:

- regional 'stayers': students with regional addresses enrolled with regional universities, or with regional campuses of metropolitan universities (12% of domestic students in 2006);
- regional 'leavers': regional students enrolled at a metropolitan campus, (8% of domestic students in 2006). This is based on students' self identified home address. It will not catch all students who have moved from a region to enrol in a city university but focuses on those who continue to regard a regional address as home;
- metropolitan 'leavers': non-regional students enrolled with regional universities or regional campuses of metropolitan universities (7% of domestic students in 2006). These students show the capacity of regional higher education institutions and campuses to attract students from the cities; and
- metropolitan 'stayers': the remaining 74% of domestic students in 2006 who were non-regional students enrolled at a metropolitan campus. This group provides a basis of comparison to identify the distinct elements of regional students' higher education and of the provision of regional universities.

Current levels of education attainment and participation are relatively low in most regions - university attainment rates in regional areas are only just more than half the levels in the capital cities.

A high proportion of students with a regional address enrol at a metropolitan campus. Across Australia there were 57,427 regional 'leavers' in 2006, 41% of all regional students. In contrast only 8% of metropolitan students (46,821) were 'leavers', i.e. enrolled at a regional campus.

A key difference between regional 'stayers' and 'leavers' is the choice of field of study. Regional 'leavers' are significantly more likely to be studying architecture and building, engineering and related technologies, and sciences. These three fields are not provided or have only a relatively limited presence at regional universities.

A number of studies show the complex range of factors that influence the educational choices of

regional people. Distance from educational facilities is a relatively minor factor in determining whether or not people from regional Australia seek higher education. More important is the perceived value of a higher education when compared with the more directly applicable skills from vocational education, or employment.

Any policy measures directed towards ensuring equitable access to post-secondary education opportunities to students from rural and regional communities must, therefore, recognise the significance of developing a comprehensive course profile in order to retain regional students within those communities, and the essential role that regional universities can play in raising the levels of aspiration for higher education in regional communities.

Current and emerging needs for higher education in regional Australia

It is a common misconception that the population in regional Australia is falling. This is not true in general, but there are very large variations between regions.

The strongest population growth in regional Australia in recent years has occurred in the coastal, 'sea change' areas; in some 'tree change' rural areas especially in and around regional centres; and in mining areas as a result of the resources boom prior to the global financial crisis. The proportion of the population living in urban areas (more than 1000 people) outside of the capital cities has grown to 30%, with the growth focused at the larger non-capital cities, mostly along the coast. These areas have also grown at the expense of rural and remote areas (population centres of less than 1000) which in 2006 comprised 12% of the population.

While recent and projected population growth is generally lower in regional areas than in the capital cities, demographic change is unlikely to result in a decline in aggregate demand for higher education across the regional areas of most States. Within this aggregate picture there is significant variation in the patterns of population growth and decline between regions, with substantial growth in demand likely in parts of Western Australia, Queensland and New South Wales (especially coastal regions)

The outlook for the Indigenous population is quite different. Compared with the nation as a whole, the Indigenous population is much younger, and growing much faster. It is also much more concentrated in the areas served by regional universities. Similarly, while the socio-economic profile of regional areas varies markedly around the country, 68.4% of all people living in disadvantaged areas (ranked in the lowest three SES deciles) reside outside of the capital cities.

The demographic and economic outlook for any region may be influenced significantly by government policy, including the funding and location of universities, and by technological and industry change. The early evidence, both from Australia and other countries, is that the new information and communications technologies have the potential to support more decentralised economic and population growth.

There have been persistent shortages of professionals in certain occupations across most States and Territories and especially in areas of regional Australia. The most recent assessments (mainly from 2008) identify skill shortages outside of metropolitan areas in at least four mainland states for 16 groups of managerial and professional occupations, including engineers, architects, accountants, health professionals, dentists, pharmacists, and veterinarians.

Employment demand for graduates in regional areas, however, is generally projected to rise quite strongly, albeit not quite as strongly as in metropolitan areas.

Attracting and retaining talent is a particular challenge facing many regions. Regional universities have long highlighted their potential to retain graduates in the professions in rural areas, primarily students from non-metropolitan locations but also in some fields substantial numbers from metropolitan areas who take positions in the country on graduation.

Low Socio-economic status

The socio-economic profile of regional areas varies markedly around the country. The distribution of lower SES areas is of particular interest in the context of the Australian Government's goals for increased higher education participation by students from low SES backgrounds. The Government has set a target that by 2020, 20 per cent of higher education enrolments at the undergraduate level will be of people from a low SES background. Achievement of this target will require a particular focus on the provision of higher education in relatively disadvantaged areas around the country.

People living in disadvantaged areas make up a much higher proportion of the population in regional areas.

Needs and opportunities

In short, the needs for change in regional higher education relate to:

- access, participation and attainment;
- regional labour force requirements; and
- the sustainability of regional universities, especially small campuses.

The opportunities for change in regional higher education relate to:

- The potential to use higher education policy as a much more active agent for regional development in Australia
- The targets of the Australian Government to boost higher education attainment rates and higher education participation rates for students from low SES backgrounds
- The projected growth in demand for higher education globally and in Australia's region
- The roll out of broadband in regional areas and the increasing use of new information and communications technologies
- More efficient and effective use of infrastructure through collaboration and co-location with other educational providers and related users on regional campuses
- The potential for some form of collaboration or integration of regional universities to deliver benefits through:
 - increased scope and depth of programs
 - consolidation of expertise and investment in distance and digital delivery, including the development of systems and program content.
 - shared use of facilities to support research activities and opportunities for joint supervision of research students.
 - increased opportunities to share resources to deliver a range of support functions more cost effectively.

Impact on educational aspirations

There is growing evidence to confirm the importance of the physical presence of higher education institutions in regional areas as a factor in raising educational aspirations of the community. Universities do this most obviously by providing courses and programs. They have a potentially significant impact on first generation students and their families by making access and participation less daunting and more affordable.

The indirect impact of regional universities on local educational aspirations includes the more subtle influence they have on the career and life plans of students and their families. The most important

factors influencing the low participation rates of low socio-economic rural students are community and family attitudes towards the relevance and advantages of university education.

The indirect impact of regional higher education extends to schools. Partnerships between universities and schools, particularly where they involve the earlier formative years, have a significant effect on the general level of aspirations of students to pursue higher education, and on the encouragement provided by teachers and peers. The more physically distant teachers and students are from a university campus the less likely they are to have opportunities to engage with the idea of participating in higher education. When universities and other tertiary providers engage directly with schools the impact can be very powerful.

Like all universities, regional providers also offer extension programs of varying kinds to broaden and sustain the lifelong learning experiences of their communities. In doing so they indirectly raise the general level of cultural capital and aspirations. These activities include ongoing events such as continuing education, summer schools and public lectures.

Higher education students from regional areas and other students of regional universities and campuses

As mentioned earlier, a high proportion of regional students are 'leavers', i.e. enrolled at a metropolitan campus. The proportions range between 24% in NSW and 91% in SA (100% in the ACT). Across Australia there were 57,427 regional 'leavers' in 2006, 41% of all regional students.

In contrast only 8% of metropolitan students (46,821) were 'leavers', i.e. enrolled at a regional campus. The largest numbers of metropolitan students enrolled at regional campuses were in NSW (27,216) and Queensland (10,493).

Age

With respect to age, 45% of regional students under 25 are enrolled in metropolitan campuses. In sharp contrast, only 4% of metropolitan students under 25 are leavers, with 96% enrolled at metropolitan campuses. A higher proportion of older metropolitan students are leavers, with 14% of the 25 to 39 and 40 and over groups enrolled at a regional campus, reflecting the higher number of employed persons studying part time and via distance in these older age groups.

Field of study

A very high proportion of regional students 'leave' to enrol in certain fields of study at metropolitan campuses. The percentages are highest for architecture and building (62%), engineering (57%), and sciences (52%). These three fields are not provided or have only a very limited presence at regional universities. Notably there have been persistent skill shortages in these professions in regional Australia.

Regional 'stayers' are much more likely to study:

- agriculture and environment (71% of regional students in the field enrol at regional campuses);
- education (70%);
- management and commerce (65%) and
- information technology (64%).

Data at State level confirm that the key factor is availability of courses. In SA and WA where the regional campuses offer restricted options, regional students enrol in health and education at metropolitan campuses in higher proportions than in other States. Engineering is offered at regional campuses in Queensland, Tasmania and WA and regional students in these States stay in regional

areas to study engineering in higher proportions than in NSW where there is no regional engineering option.

Metropolitan students are most likely to enrol at a regional campus if they are studying agriculture and environmental and related studies, education, and management and commerce. The enrolments in management and commerce partly reflect the relatively large number of postgraduate coursework students studying by distance and digital education in this field.

Mode of study

Even when regional students are enrolled at regional campuses, a relatively high proportion of them study externally or in mixed mode: 47% of regional 'stayers' are enrolled in these modes (31% external, 16% mixed mode). Only 53% of regional 'stayers' are studying internally. This indicates the difficulties of access confronting students in regional areas. In contrast, 87% of metropolitan students who 'stay' enrolled at metropolitan campuses study internally.

Regional students who 'leave' to enrol at a metropolitan university are more likely to be studying internally than their regional colleagues who 'stay' at regional campuses. 71% of regional 'leavers' study internally, reflecting the fact that most of them have enrolled at metropolitan campuses to take on-campus programs.

The majority of metropolitan 'leavers' on the other hand enrol at regional campuses externally – 72% of this group – and a further 7% study in mixed mode. Only 7% of the metropolitan 'leavers' study internally at a regional campus.

Factors influencing take-up and completion of higher education by students from regional areas

Studies show that rural students have a greater focus on education and training leading to employment. **Rural students are more concerned than urban students about the cost of university, primarily living costs, rather than the formal charges:** they are also more convinced that university attendance would be interesting and fun. **For regional school students going to a university, rather than having it come to them, is an attraction factor if income would permit the move.**

Various studies bring out the complex range of factors that influence how regional people consider whether to take up tertiary education and training and, if they wish to, what they look for from a university.

The status of the university is important but distance from educational facilities is a minor factor in determining whether or not people from regional Australia seek higher education. More important is the perceived value of a higher education when compared with the more directly applicable skills from vocational education, or employment. The sense of personal 'rightness' for university education plays an important role in these orientations and aspirations, along with particular factors related to social and educational background.

Financial capacity is also an important element influencing people's decisions regarding moving away to access higher education, while wariness of debt tied to some lack of knowledge about university charges adds further disincentives.

Clearly, however, if regional universities are unable to offer a full range of courses then regional students will look elsewhere.

Financial sustainability of regional universities

In general, regional universities face greater challenges than larger metropolitan universities in generating a sustainable financial return that enables them to invest in infrastructure and innovation. Regional universities tend to have less diverse revenue profiles and face significant diseconomies of

scale on smaller campuses.

There is also evidence of additional costs faced by regional universities in relation to their relatively high proportions of part time, Indigenous and low SES students, as well as their unfunded community engagement activities.

The changes announced in the Budget will bring some financial benefits but also some increased risks from increased competition for students flowing from the introduction of student demand driven funding from 2012. The financial benefits of the Budget changes will be limited and will not flow immediately. The increases to research funding will be concentrated in the research intensive metropolitan universities.

Conclusions

The above analysis provides the following key points:

- participation rates in higher education are substantially lower in regional areas than in the capital cities and other metropolitan areas
- considerably more regional students than metropolitan students move away from home to study at university
- a high proportion of students with a regional address enrol at a metropolitan campus and in many cases this is to study in a field not available or with limited availability at regional universities
- distance from a university campus is not a major factor in determining whether or not people from regional Australia seek higher education; if regional universities are unable to offer a full range of courses then regional students are prepared to look elsewhere
- financial capacity is an important element influencing people's decisions regarding moving away to access higher education.

Given the above, any government policy measure(s) that increased the financial capacity of regional students to move to a university where the appropriate course was available, whether it be within a regional or metropolitan area, would appear beneficial.

At the same time, it would appear beneficial to provide, to regional students in particular, greater opportunities to study in those fields currently not well catered for in the non-metropolitan regions, for example, architecture and building, engineering and related technologies, and sciences.

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