Parliament of Victoria: Education and Training Committee

Inquiry into Geographical Differences in the Rate in which Victorian Students Participate in Higher Education

Australian Catholic University has a long-standing commitment to improving access to education for those from disadvantaged backgrounds and has, for example, received recognition in relation to its educational outcomes for Australian Indigenous peoples and its program of university studies for the homeless. It has a particular commitment to addressing the needs of rural and regional Australia and to this end operates its campus in Ballarat [as well as five metropolitan campuses in Brisbane, Canberra, Melbourne and Sydney (2)] and teaches off-campus in several locations in regional Australia, including Shepparton. The Ballarat campus of Australian Catholic University, Aquinas Campus, has its origins in the early twentieth century and is well-known and highly regarded for its contributions to the national priority areas of teacher and nurse education.

Australian Catholic University commends the Victorian Government for conducting its Inquiry into Geographical Differences in the Rate in which Victorian Students Participate in Higher Education – the differential rates of participation are a very serious issue with long term ramifications for the economic and social wellbeing of Victoria and more broadly for Australia. The University welcomes the opportunity to provide input, as presented below, against the Committee’s Terms of Reference.

Terms of Reference: The Committee will be exploring the reasons for and impact of such differences and would be interested in receiving comment on:

a) variations in the number and type of university applications, offers, acceptances and completions in different metropolitan, rural and regional areas

Firstly, the University wishes to highlight the lower rural and regional participation rates in higher education. Differences in rates of participation are well documented and the data consistently indicate a lower rate of participation in regional and rural than in metropolitan areas. Relevant resources include:

- On Track, Keeping Young People’s Futures On Track, a project of the Victorian Government’s Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and the Centre for Post-Compulsory Education and Lifelong Learning, The University of Melbourne (accessed on 10 March 2008 at http://www.sofweb.vic.edu.au/voced/ontrack/default.htm);
- ‘Everything is Harder’: Participation in Tertiary Education of Young People from Rural and Regional Victoria (2007) prepared by the School of Education, University of Ballarat.
Australian Catholic University currently offers a rural bonus of 5 ENTER points to students from rural and remote schools as a means to overcome educational disadvantage and foster higher education participation by these communities.

For comparable courses, Australian Catholic University experiences lower rates of application and less first preferences for the Ballarat than the Melbourne campus. It adjusts the number of offers to achieve the targeted acceptance rate, which is generally lower at the Ballarat campus than for its metropolitan counterpart. As highlighted in more detail below, one outcome is generally lower ENTER scores for the regional campus. Further, following partial successful completion of their studies, some students seek to transfer to a Melbourne-based campus, at this or another university, impacting on retention rates for smaller rural campuses.

b) influences of school retention rates, including enrolments and completions for VCE, VCAL and VET in schools on participation in higher education

Again lower school retention rates are well-documented for regional Victoria. This educational disadvantage impacts significantly on higher education participation. In particular, the ability for early rural school leavers to return to school or TAFE to complete VCE, VCAL or VET is much more limited than their metropolitan counterparts.

c) influences of participation in other post-school pathways, including TAFE enrolments and take-up of apprenticeships or other employment opportunities, on participation in higher education

Currently, a strong economy and high employment are encouraging greater participation in apprenticeships or other employment opportunities and Victoria (and other States) has seen a reduction in the number of applications for university places. In regional Victoria (and Australia), the impact of long-standing drought has made such employment opportunities especially attractive, particularly in light of the costs associated with higher education and with leaving home to study.

d) potential geographic, economic, social, cultural and other influences on university applications, offers, acceptances and completions across Victorian communities

e) advantages and disadvantages of participation and non-participation in higher education for school leavers and their families and communities in different metropolitan, rural and regional areas

f) potential effects of geographical differences in participation in higher education on skills shortages and the Victorian economy

Completion of schooling and subsequent post-school education are of critical importance in meeting the demands of the changing work environment linked to globalisation and the knowledge economy. Rural youth are particularly vulnerable due to:

• the demographics of rural Australia,
• restructurings impacting on rural industries, and
• educational disadvantage in relation to remoteness from educational opportunities, curriculum choice, a more limited teaching workforce and other resourcing issues for rural schools, and less opportunity to undertake relevant work experience (as a means of decision-making in relation to higher education).

Further, a key influence on undertaking higher education is the family and local environment, namely that parents and/or siblings have benefited from university study and that the local
community values this opportunity for its youth. Often rural youth do not have these motivations. Thus, there may be less aspiration to undertake higher education than for comparable metropolitan youth. Additionally, the economic hardships experienced by rural communities, including the outcomes of 12 years of drought, impose restrictions in relation to the costs of higher education and, in many cases, of moving to a regional city or Melbourne to attend a university. The direct benefits of work versus the longer-term goals of higher education together with a Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) liability represent a disincentive to higher education. Importantly, there is evidence (e.g. in the above-listed resources) that some rural students may not be well-informed about options for post-secondary education in regional areas of Victoria and the various financial support schemes available to support them during university study.

Australian Catholic University’s experience at its regional campus in Ballarat shows that in recent years the proportion of undergraduate students coming to the campus from the metropolitan area has increased, as metropolitan students and their families become more flexible in their consideration of higher education opportunities and take advantage of the ENTER differential. The ENTER score for a given course is almost invariably lower at a regional campus than that for the equivalent course at the metropolitan campus/es and, with the educational advantages from their schooling, this again tends to favour metropolitan over rural students, who have less options and opportunities during schooling. Metropolitan students attending regional campuses are likely to return to Melbourne and thus this new pattern of enrolment adds to further disadvantage for regional and rural communities, in terms of workforce skilling and community capacity building, social inclusion and equity.

g) strategies to address any barriers contributing to geographic differences in participation in higher education

The University would like to suggest the following strategies to improve outcomes for regional students with respect to higher education studies:

1. Financial resourcing is a key issue for rural and regional students. The additional burden of relocation and the cost of living away from home pose a significant disincentive for many of them as they contemplate the transition to higher education. The current Commonwealth Accommodation Scholarships provide much needed assistance to some students but they cover only a proportion of those requiring support. The University recommends a program whereby any student who has to leave home and relocate elsewhere in order to undertake higher education has the option to take up a government-provided accommodation loan which is not means-tested and which is administered along similar lines to the HECS program. Such a program of assistance for housing and essential living costs would greatly assist rural and regional students and would help to redress the current inequities in participation in higher education.

2. The current program whereby prospective students, graduating from Year 12 programs, can become eligible for Youth Allowance, if they defer for 18 months and earn $18,000 in the period of deferment, is impacting detrimentally on participation in higher education. This scheme encourages students to defer their enrolment and this has serious ramifications because a proportion of those students do not take up their place after the period of deferment. This situation is also related to the students’ financial needs. The accommodation loan program suggested in (1) above would assist in alleviating the pressure to defer on students exiting Year 12.
3. Another option to overcome the financial disincentive associated with living away from home would be a Tertiary Allowance Scheme providing an allowance to all such students who are undertaking higher education (pro-rata, if part-time). This kind of scheme would support students’ living costs and alleviate the financial burden on them and/or their families and the need to undertake part-time work to the current extent (on average in the order of 16 hours per week). The burden on families, especially in drought-affected and other socio-economic disadvantaged areas, is not to be underestimated as a factor impacting on participation in higher education.

4. As well as the issue of financial assistance programs for rural and regional students to encourage them to participate in higher education, another important issue is bringing those funding programs effectively to the attention of the eligible students and their families. Regional and rural students and their families, in the University’s experience, are much more debt-averse than their metropolitan counterparts. The prospect of the expenditure necessary to sustain three or four years of tertiary study seems almost impossible for many, and simply not worth the effort and financial strain involved. It is vital to address the currently poor level of understanding and knowledge of the available financing, incentives and support options that are available. More effective training of and communication with School Careers Advisers would be helpful in addressing some of these problems. The influence of Careers Advisers on participation in higher education is also not to be underestimated and better access to training would be another constructive strategy.

5. A further financial option, targeted at rural families’ concerns about added debt, would be a scheme to reduce the HECS liability of rural students who, following completion of their university studies, remain or return to work in regional Australia. This might be an incentive for them to enter higher education in the first instance and also contribute to revitalisation of regional communities by their later workforce participation.

6. Access to reasonably priced accommodation is another key issue for rural and regional students. It would be very helpful if local and State government could assist regional campuses by providing accommodation infrastructure for students undertaking higher education. A housing co-operative arrangement, conducted along similar lines to public housing, would assist in redressing the disincentives regarding accommodation which rural and regional students face in undertaking higher education.

7. Finally, one macro issue is of considerable importance. In recent years some Government and other infrastructure has been decentralised into regional cities. This is a commendable development in relation to revitalising rural Victoria. However, very large numbers of commuters from regional Victoria, especially from Ballarat, Bendigo and Geelong, travel to Melbourne and back to work on a daily basis. The further decentralisation of Government departments and industry would allow critical development of infrastructure in regional areas of the State and open up improved opportunities, including with respect to higher education participation, for those Victorians living outside the metropolis.

In closing Australian Catholic University notes that there is as yet no clear and consistent definition of the words “regional” and “rural” – this can lead to a measure of confusion and lack of clarity in discussing and addressing regional and rural issues and the Education and Training Committee might seek to provide such definitions.
A number of the issues addressed above are also of relevance to outer metropolitan areas but this submission has focused on the rural and regional context because of the greater level of disadvantage faced by these communities.

The University wishes the Education and Training Committee well for the conduct of this key Inquiry into Geographical Differences in the Rate in which Victorian Students Participate in Higher Education. Australian Catholic University would be pleased to attend a hearing and have further input into advancing equitable educational opportunities for all Victorians.

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