Submission to the State Parliamentary Inquiry into Geographical Differences in the Rate in which Victorian Students Participate in Higher Education

Prepared by the Deakin University Student Association

Representing students of Deakin University, Deakin University Student Association (DUSA) is one of the largest student run organisations in the country. In 2007, over 33,600 students were enrolled at Deakin University, nearly 30% of whom were enrolled ‘off-campus,’ and one-quarter as postgraduates. Deakin University currently comprises five campuses, across rural, regional and urban Victoria. They are the Melbourne campus at Burwood, the Geelong campuses at Waterfront and Waurn Ponds, the Warrnambool campus and the Distance campus. As such, DUSA represents a diverse demographic of students.

DUSA strives to contribute to all public debates on matters that affect our members – students – who are the major stakeholders in the Australian Higher Education sector.

The submission prepared by the Deakin University Student Association concerns itself with a series of key themes which explore the ability of students from rural and regional Victoria to access higher education, and continue through their studies, at Deakin University.

These themes are:

• Access to Higher Education for Rural and Regional Students
• Diversity of Courses at Deakin University

• Housing and Equity Services at Deakin University

• Government Assistance for Rural and Regional Students at Deakin University

Access to Higher Education for Rural and Regional Students:

The ability of students from regional areas to access higher education is dramatically decreased in comparison to those from metropolitan areas. This ability to access tertiary education is significantly affected by a number of key and systemic factors.

a. The prevalence of a lower socio-economical demographic in regional communities, comparative to the metropolitan demographic.

b. The hardship placed on those wishing to access education, and their families due to the geographical distance that is often placed between them and a higher education institute.

c. The low rate of secondary school participation in many rural and remote communities.

d. The inability to access to affordable housing to access higher education away from home.

Testimonials provided to the association by student members from rural and regional communities reiterate that there are substantial barriers which decrease the opportunities to access higher education and indeed continued studies.

Diversity of courses in rural and regional Victoria

Deakin University has promoted a high quality and level of diversity of courses at its regional campuses in Geelong and Warrnambool. Primary courses such as Law, Education, Commerce, Arts and Nursing are accessible at these regional communities, and there are a range of specialist disciplines now offered exclusively at the University’s
regional campus, such as the Marine Biology at the Warrnambool campus. Of significant note is the recent establishment of the new Deakin University medical college at the University’s Geelong campus in Waurn Ponds.

This parody in the nature of courses being offered does assist those from rural and regional communities’ access higher education. However, feedback from members in these communities alludes to problems with the perception of these courses. Due to demand the VTAC ENTER (Equivalence National Tertiary Entrance Rank) for these courses are significantly lower than comparative courses in Metropolitan Victoria, this is perpetuated by low demand and only serves to detract the value of these rural and regional courses.

Further work is needed to promote the option to rural and regional students the advantages of staying in these communities as opposed to moving to the metropolitan areas to commence University studies. This would in turn hopefully promote those from regional communities to commence University studies.

Housing and Equity Services at Deakin University

Students at each campus of Deakin University are affected by a unique set of challenges; these challenges are felt most acutely by the students and staff at the University’s rural and regional campuses at Warrnambool and Geelong.

Deakin University Student Association, through agreement with Deakin University, provides a range of key services to support rural and regional students. These include:

- Academic Advocacy service
- Textbook Retail
- Housing Service
- Representation
- Sport and Recreation services

Deakin University also provides a range of student support services, through its Division of Student Life these services include:

- Academic Skills Training

- “Job Shop” - An employment referral program, to assist University students find employment

- Language skills

- Medical and Counselling services

All of these are essential student services which are provided on campus for rural and regional students studying at Deakin University.

However, further assistance is needed to ensure that these services can be delivered on a long term, sustainable basis, like many student organisations across the country, DUSA’s ability to provide adequate support to the University community has been seriously compromised. The financial challenges placed upon the organisation since the introduction of the Higher Education Support Amendment (Abolition of Compulsory Up-Front Student Union fees) Act 2005 have meant that the association has been forced to make staff redundancies, reduce the number of support services we provide and increase sale costs of goods and services in order to survive these financial challenges.

A significant point of concern relates to students studying in rural and regional areas such as Geelong and Warrnambool who are significantly disadvantaged as services are further reduced. The effect of this environment on the sustainability and engagement of
rural and regional campuses is a significant point of concern. Metro-based students are often able to access essential services in nearby areas, although they may not be as accommodating or understanding of student needs. Currently the limited services on these campuses are financially sustained via overall membership income and commercial operations income based at our Melbourne campus.

**Government Assistance for rural and regional students at Deakin University:**

While there exists at present dedicated funding streams and projects to assist rural and regional students with their Higher Education; at all levels there are serious challenges facing rural and regional students, where specific government funding is needed, as highlighted throughout the report.

- Government Assistance is required to support the delivery of essential student services which are invaluable in assisting rural and regional students,

- Further funding is required to assist Universities and Higher Education Institutes in promoting the value of University places in rural and regional Victoria.

- Greater Government assistance is also required in ensuring that there is adequate student income support to as to help rural and regional students overcome the established barriers.

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