Context and Challenges faced by Swinburne

Swinburne is a relatively new University of Technology, being established in 1992 from a foundation in 1908 as a technical college. From this time, it has possessed a rich history of involvement with business and the wider community. Swinburne today, continues to have a strong involvement with business and a focus on vocational and industry relevant teaching and research. As a former institute of technology, it has a tightly focused academic profile with an emphasis on engineering, business, information technology, design, and health and human services. It is a dual sector university (combining both TAFE and Higher Education) and is relatively small as an institution of Higher Education.

Swinburne’s higher educational programmes are concentrated primarily in inner suburban Melbourne. The institution traditionally draws the majority of its students from a confined, homogeneous catchment area that is not defined as economically disadvantaged. Rather, the main campus at Hawthorn is surrounded by some of the most affluent suburbs in Victoria. However, the campus in the Lilydale region draws its students from a more economically repressed area.

Consequently, as a small institution with a narrowly defined academic profile, Swinburne finds it particularly challenging to attract rural and regional students and students from outer suburban areas, particularly those who are also from low SES and from disadvantaged backgrounds.

However, Swinburne has as one of its priorities in its domestic recruitment plan, to increase access for rural and regional students and accordingly has developed an institutional scholarship program to facilitate this. This is in addition to the Commonwealth Scholarship (CS) Program funded by the Commonwealth Government & established in 2004.

The comments offered below reflect not only wide experience in developing strategies to attract rural students and students from disadvantaged backgrounds but also the information we have gained over the past five years from the statements that students themselves have written on their scholarship application forms, both Commonwealth & institutional and on feedback forms. Students have reported on their past schooling, their knowledge of post school options for study and careers, the learning opportunities and resources or lack of them when living in a rural community and their aspirations for further study. In addition, while nationally, little research has been undertaken about the value and impact of scholarships to rural and regional students, Swinburne has routinely sought and analysed feedback from its awardees and stakeholders which has generally been very positive about this particular strategy. There is, however, an abundance of research evidence showing that students from rural backgrounds and metropolitan students from low socio economic backgrounds, are nevertheless, under represented in higher education. Swinburne
shares the Government’s concern that this complex issue should be highlighted for further action.

In addition to the above mentioned sources for the following comments, information is provided from a significant institutional study. In 2005, at Swinburne, Tanya Carson undertook a Sociology stream of the Honours Program in which she studied student hardship including rural disadvantage and several of the comments below are taken from this study or are confirmed by her research. The study was entitled *Overcoming Student Hardship: a study of the situation faced by Swinburne undergraduates in the Equity Scholarships Program and the Commonwealth Learning Scholarships Program (CLSP)*. The CLSP has since been rebadged as the CSP. (Details of the Swinburne study available on request). The current system by which a student has access to a CS is linked to their postcode. As identified in the Carson study

> It is important to note, however, that in many cases, this method of identification does not adequately reflect a student’s financial background and level of disadvantage and need. The [Government’s] measure of low SES is based on the application of the ABS Index of Education and Occupation to the postcode of students’ permanent home address. Student Equity at Swinburne has not always used this Index as an indicator of SES when developing new initiatives or assessing scholarship applications. One problem with the Index is that students, particularly rural students, often move away from home to live closer to campus, using their residing address as their permanent address. Hawthorn (where the largest of the five Swinburne campuses is located) is identified as a high SES area, so if we used the ABS Index of Education and Occupation, students who had relocated to this area would be incorrectly classified.

Carson continues

> Due to such problems with government definitions of SES by postcode, the Student Equity Unit instead measures financial disadvantage as an indicator of low SES, rather than rely solely on the ABS Index of Education and Occupation. It includes looking at the living situation of the student, and looking at the incomes of the student and others upon whom the student may be financially dependent (e.g. parents). A written statement is provided by each applicant, where anything from levels of debt brought about by drought to messy divorce settlements and family abuse may indicate reasons for financial disadvantage.

It is in this context that I provide the following feedback to the Parliament of Victoria’s Parliamentary Inquiry into Geographical Differences in the Rate in which Victorian Students Participate in Higher Education.

**Particular challenges faced by students from specific geographic locations (e.g. outer-suburban, rural or remote areas)**

These include:

1. Lack of access to resources and knowledge about what to do post secondary school (See Alloway et al 2004; James et al 1999; Kilpatrick and Abbott-Chapman 2002);
2. Lack of resources at a small school including lack of skilled teachers in subject areas relevant to further study and / or limited subject choice for VCE due to limited expertise of teaching staff;
3. Where distance type learning was offered to students to increase their choice of subjects, students reported that these arrangements were not always suitable to them. Students believe that they do not get the same learning and teaching support for these distance subjects as city counterparts enjoy. These distance subjects were often reliant on having technology available to access these resources eg. Teleconferencing equipment, high speed internet etc;

4. Lack of sufficient and current career advice and career information;

5. Need to be better informed about prerequisite subjects that need to be studied in order to gain entry into specific further education courses;

6. Students expected to help on the farm or property to enable the family to survive, taking time away from study;

7. Many students mentioned their disadvantage in not being able to access or having limited access to the VCE Support Programs offered to students, due to their only being held in city locations. Among the problems students reported in attempting to access these programs, are the costs of travel to the city and the time taken away from the remainder of their studies eg. missing other classes in order to attend;

8. Students expected to help with young siblings and this takes time away from study;

9. Over the past five years or so we have noted that many rural families are asset rich but income poor and have adjusted criteria for funding to acknowledge this;

10. Many students face difficulties in their schooling years of long hours spent in travel to and from school which leaves them less time to study;

11. Students in need are reluctant to take on further debt when they and their families are already faced with financial difficulty to relocate and undertake tertiary study. In the Carson study (2005), it was revealed that 32% of families had had to borrow money to enable their young person to attend university. Many students themselves, need to postpone study and work for a year to amass sufficient funds before coming to University and often during this time, motivation is lost and study is then postponed and they miss out on knowing about available scholarships;

12. Taxable income and the allowable income levels for students create a problem. The Commonwealth Government needs to change its policies so that students are not taxed from institutional scholarships, bursaries and grants provided by universities, state government departments, trusts and philanthropic agencies, etc. This tax factor prohibits many associations from making grants and scholarships available;

13. The perceived costs and the very real costs, of studying away from home, are seen as a significant barrier: the high costs of living in a big city is prohibitive to families where the budget is already tight and family finances are under great strain; the cost of travelling home to visit family is necessary but is also difficult to be able to afford;

14. The costs of accommodation and food act as a deterrent to move away from home to attend further education;

15. Leaving behind friends, family, part time jobs and a known social network of people is a strain;

16. The "digital divide" acts as a further barrier. (The digital divide refers to those with access to information technology and to those without.) Access in rural
areas is often poor. In particular, those who are from small rural towns find that the library may only have one computer and that computer access times are restrictive;

17. Schools too, were reported to be under resourced in the information technology area;

18. Family values and views of tertiary study which may be misplaced, uninformed or not up to date. Being the first in the family to study at university is often an enormous challenge;

19. Finding part time work in rural areas to help save money to support themselves at university has become more difficult due to the effects of the drought and bushfires.

20. Indigenous student participation still needs better strategies to attract and retain young people from this cohort in rural and metropolitan areas.

21. Another cohort, usually from metropolitan areas, that urgently needs greater holistic methods of assistance, better funding, awareness of their plight and greater understanding, is refugee and asylum seeker students trying to study at tertiary level; and

22. A major challenge is finding better ways that schools, tertiary institutions, governments, families and communities can work together to cross boundaries and work cohesively to develop aspirations and provide opportunities for students at a much earlier age that will lead to study at university. At present, each area appears to work largely within its own perceived parameters. However, inter-sectoral activities and articulation programs between TAFE and Higher Education form an exception to this. The greater development of the interface between TAFE and Higher Education is an important and growing system that assists students from rural, regional and also metropolitan areas to access higher education, but it requires significant institutional will and commitment, particularly at the most senior levels, for high levels of articulation to be achieved. (For further details about articulation, particularly at Swinburne where achievements in this area are outstanding, see comments in section three item no. 6)

Current policies and programs that help to support students from specific geographic locations to remain at university and complete their studies

These include:

1. Providing scholarship programs, bursaries and grants helps to support students from specific geographical backgrounds such as rural areas, to remain and complete their studies. In the study by Carson (2005), it was reported that, prior to receiving a scholarship, 88.5% of all respondents said they had to work to help pay for study and living costs. Once in receipt of a scholarship, 49.1% said they did not have to work as much. Once in receipt of a scholarship, 87% said it helped improve their living and studying situation. It was further reported that 95% of all students could afford their text books and course related materials most of the time, once in receipt of a scholarship. As one student in the study cohort declared:

“[it’s] nice to have the scholarship as a buffer between me and poverty”

(Female student from a rural background)
2. Additional scholarships are needed from state government departments that assist students to acquire expertise in priority areas and then return to their local community to make a contribution once more. Many students report an appreciation of their country childhood years and express a desire to help their community once qualified;

3. Provision of notebooks and laptops to disadvantaged students to assist them to catch up to their more fortunate city students who generally are more IT savvy is proving very beneficial. Several universities, Swinburne included, are negotiating with their institutional providers of IT equipment such as ACER, HP etc to create scholarships around awarding computers/laptops to disadvantaged students;

4. Outreach programs are increasingly significant, but are costly to mount. These are activities where the university attempts to build a bridge and a presence with local communities by taking classes, academic staff and lectures to local areas to be seen as a known part of the community, not just a travelling fair. Information needs to be provided about university study that demystifies the subject and the institution that is appealing to young people, but also of interest to their families and associates. An example of an initiative in this area is the CD produced in 2007 by the University of Queensland and other Queensland universities known as “Project U”. These outreach programs create on going support in communities for tertiary studies and assist students to stay committed to their studies;

5. Open Days at institutions where parents and prospective students are given travel allowances to visit campuses and are provided with student guides to meet academic and administrative staff and learn about courses and facilities, including student support services. Often, the high level of personal customer service provided by staff and students on these occasions, translates to additional enrolments;

6. Ambassador programs where students return to their former schools to talk to younger pupils about living away from home and the joys, challenges and trials of meeting new friends and studying in a much bigger place, in initially, a strange city. This activity is very popular and effective with rural schools;

7. Initiatives such as a Food Bank, recently established by Swinburne, for times that students need emergency food supplies once living away from home and or family assistance, are important;

8. Orientation programs for rural students to meet others, learn about student clubs and societies and student support services, are a regular feature. Feedback from students about orientation for rural students has been very positive;

9. Having relevant, well resourced student support services and student amenities associations are essential;

10. Mentoring programs for first year students, involving second and third year students are increasingly a feature of a positive experience that assists students to persist in their studies; and

11. Learning communities/peer assisted support programs being formed with other groups of students doing similar subjects and courses to assist students with subjects they find difficult, are effective.
Additional supports that may be required to assist such students to commence/or complete university study

In general, easing the cost burden for students from rural, regional and disadvantaged metropolitan backgrounds is a key issue in creating greater access for these students. Several of the other key issues are also related to the need to improve the current welfare system for students and this involves the Commonwealth, rather than the State government. However, as detailed below, when a state government does support a strategy such as developing more scholarships and bursaries in areas for example, of skill shortages, it too, is hampered by the current system.

Amongst conditions that would better allow students to access, persist with and complete their studies are the following:

1. More and better paid scholarships and the introduction of a Commonwealth studying allowance are needed to assist students to study while not existing in poverty. Many students need to work on a seasonal, casual basis when their health and studies permit this but are inhibited from this by the welfare system as it presently exists (see comments made previously);

2. There is an urgent need for the existing Commonwealth legislation (Section 8 of the Security Act) to be amended to remove an anomaly in the treatment of the federal government’s equity scholarships, known as Commonwealth Scholarships and other scholarships provided from a variety of other sources. Currently, university and other scholarships are treated as income under the social security income test, whereas Commonwealth Scholarships are not;

3. Many philanthropic associations/organisations report there is less inclination from their members to provide scholarships once they are aware of the negative impact this can have for the student. These scholarships should be exempt from being regarded as income for the purpose of students’ Centrelink income assessment purposes;

4. Many universities, Swinburne included, report a high level of unmet demand for equity scholarships for students from rural, regional and metropolitan backgrounds and as well as providing their own institutional scholarships, they are attempting to have and they need, a robust fund raising/sponsorship program to compliment this and create more scholarships;

5. The allowable threshold of earning for students should be reviewed and set at a realistic level. It has remained set at $6,000:00 for more than 5 years. This is set too low at a time when the costs of undertaking a university course of study have increased significantly. Many studies report that students continue to have to work long hours to supplement their allowance and this is detrimental to their studies (Long, M & Hayden, M, 2001);

As Swinburne has found, the number of students who had considered deferring and/or discontinuing their studies for financial reasons, decreased from 57% to 3.8% once they were in receipt of a scholarship (Carson, T 2005). As one respondent said:

“Without awards like this, I don’t know where I’d be”

(Female student from a metropolitan background)

6. Pathways to study and direct entry schemes offer another important enabling factor for greater access and for success in higher education for some
students from rural, regional and metropolitan areas. Swinburne, as a dual sector University (combining both TAFE and Higher Education) has a well established and successful Pathways Program to ensure that students gain maximum benefit from their previous studies, whether TAFE or University, within Australia or overseas. Swinburne has consistently had in recent years, as a percentage of the commencing, undergraduate cohort, the highest national level of TAFE – Higher Education articulation.

In 2007, the percentage of the domestic commencing undergraduate cohort of TAFE articulants at Swinburne, was 27.1% (“Unofficial’ preliminary figures for Swinburne in 2007). As well, as reported by (Young, 2006) the success rate of these students in academic courses at Swinburne, is significantly higher than other comparable institutions and also, comparable to high achieving Year 12 leavers. Young further reports, these achievements have been the result of a major institutional strategic direction with support programs being developed in both TAFE and HE. (Swinburne Statement of Direction 2015). As these developments have financial implications and costs for an institution for bridging programs and modifying course design and teaching, and they also require a significant level of cooperation between sectors, it would not be feasible for all institutions to develop this element of education. However, for some institutions, this will be an effective system to address in order to assist those many school leavers who are challenged in their transition to higher education. (Young, 2006)

As indicated in previous statements, having a vibrant on campus experience for students as well as relevant, ‘real world’ curricula, well resourced student support services, and better pathways to study from TAFE to Higher Education are all conditions that enable students from diverse backgrounds and locations to access university and to succeed at their studies. At the same time, such positive efforts are hampered by the increasingly high costs of studying at tertiary level, costs that students report are not sufficiently recognised by governments and institutions.

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