April 2008

Parliament of Victoria Education and Training Committee

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

Rural Education Australia Forum Submission

Introduction

The Rural Education Forum Australia welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Inquiry into Geographical Differences in the rate in which Victorian Students Participate in Higher Education.

REFA was formed in 2002 in response to the HREOC Inquiry into Rural and Remote Education initiated in February 1999.

REFA is a collective of national organisations which represent the consumers and/or providers of education services in rural and remote Australia- see Appendix 1 for details.

REFA’s vision is quality education and training outcomes in rural and remote areas, so that individuals, families and communities can develop their full potential in the social, economic, political and cultural life of the nation.

REFA’s work recognises the importance and value of people in rural and remote areas being able to realise their full potential in their environment, and the fundamental importance of education in enabling them to do this.

REFA’s work is based on principles of social justice, equity and improved access to the range of goods, services and entitlements that impact on education or on services related to education and educational outcomes.

This submission focuses principally on rural youth and their transition issues relating to participation in higher education.
Position Statement

Vibrant and productive rural communities are integral to the long term sustainability of any nation, and especially one like Australia where most people live in cities and environs.

It is widely acknowledged that rural communities in Australia (Hugo 2000, McSwan 2003, Salt 2005) are experiencing fundamental changes socially, politically, environmentally and economically through loss of population, loss or consolidation of services, the impacts of globalisation, drought, and the harvesting of natural resources, frequently unsustainably, to feed growth.

A particularly striking aspect of the changes taking place in rural Australia is the decline in the number of youth who remain in rural communities beyond school leaving age. Added to this is the complex matter of how gender manifests itself in rural communities, plus the imbalances created where young females leave rural areas at a higher rate than young males (Alston, 2005).

Youth are fundamentally future oriented, and as such, are a critical human resource for re-building and re-energising rural Australia. Salt(2005) asserts, “it is the loss of youth and the partial replacement of that demographic by older people that is of most concern …[because] the structural shift has an impact on the economic wellbeing of a community and also on the sense of [its] vitality…”(p.68).

Major Barriers/Inhibitors to Participation in Higher Education

REFA draws the Inquiry’s attention to a number of barriers/inhibitors to increasing the participation rates of students in higher education. The first is the formative experiences that students have in their primary and early secondary years of schooling. Linked with this is the range of school choices that geographically isolated students have and the consequent issues that limited choice throws up, such as to stay local or move off to a boarding facility at a relatively early age.

Secondly, there is the matter of the cost of participation in higher education if it means having to relocate out of the family home and establish new support networks. Recently the Deputy Prime Minister (The Australian, 4 April 2008) drew attention to the decline in the percentage of students from rural backgrounds attending universities, and the role that costs may have played in creating this situation.

Thirdly, there is the matter of the number and dispersal of universities in regional locations and the extent to which they offer a real opportunity for rural students.

Fourthly, there are the ‘twin’ issues of the breadth and depth of senior secondary curriculum accessible to rural students and the qualification levels of some rural teachers to teach to year 12. Professional teaching bodies have for a number of years now, drawn attention to the fact many senior secondary subjects are taught by teachers who do not have sufficient disciplinary knowledge. These teachers also tend to be less experienced than many of their metropolitan counterparts and have less experience in professional committees like syllabus writing and assessment panels.
Rural Youth Mobility

In February 2007, the Australian Council for Educational Research released a report on movement of non-metropolitan youth towards the cities.

The sample for the report was selected in 1997 when the majority of the youth were in year 11. The research for the report tracks the sample through to the end of 2004. The findings of the tracking include:

- more than one third of young people in non-metropolitan areas re-locate to a major city immediately after leaving school
- some return to a non-metropolitan location, but overall there is a net loss of nearly 25% of young people to these kinds of places
- of those making the move out of a non-metropolitan area, around 40% do so for further study reasons including university, TAFE, apprenticeships and traineeships
- those with full time employment in their non-metropolitan location were more likely to stay there

Rural Youth and Participation in Higher Education

Research conducted in 1999 by the University of Melbourne found that rural youth were grossly under represented in higher education as a proportion of national population. The research argued that the “rate of barely 19% versus a population share of nearly 30% should concern all those with an interest in the future development of the intellectual assets of all Australians, regardless of where they live” (p. i). REFA strongly endorses the position taken here.

REFA also agrees with another key argument made in the report namely, “aspirations for higher education… are influenced by a subtle web of interwoven characteristics [including]… social background, financial resources, where people live and the collective values of the local community culture” (p. i).

One of the main findings of research undertaken by the Australian Council for Educational Research (2000) into non completion of schooling further emphasises how critical it is to develop better understanding of the interplay between rural contexts and post school study pathways viz, “living in rural areas of Australia [as well as] attendance at a government school, being male, and having low SES origins increase the chances of non-completion” (p.54). For youth, successful completion of schooling is a pre-requisite to having an option of participating in higher education.

In a paper entitled Urban and Rural Differences in Educational Outcomes, Ainley (2001) suggests that to interpret “differences between rural and urban locations one might look at aspirations developed in the location as a result of proximity to a range of opportunities and to practical impediments to moving to undertake university study” (p.12). Further, Ainley states that “differences between rural, regional and
urban locations in university participation appear to match expressed intentions of students in year 9” (p.12).

Moving beyond the Australian context to a rural fishing community in Nova Scotia, Corbett’s (2007) research around several key questions—“who stays, who goes and what role [does] formal education play in the distinction between staying and leaving” (p.243) is particularly relevant and informative. The research clearly shows that any strategies to narrow the gap between rural and urban higher education participation rates have to be multi-dimensional, and must engage with local and wider contexts simultaneously.

**Actions to Address Barriers Contributing to Geographic Differences in Participation in Higher Education**

The research cited above linked to the basic values enunciated in the position statement, the barriers and the experiences of various members of REFA, suggest that at least 4 main kinds of action need to be taken to increase the participation of rural students in higher education. The actions proposed are intended to improve the pre-tertiary choices available to rural students; to enhance curriculum delivery flexibility; to provide greater financial support; and to create an academic culture oriented towards higher education.

1. **Positive Profiling and Promotion of Rural Contexts**

   The first set of actions should focus on creating a positive, non deficit view of rural communities and more particularly, rural education. Put another way, metro-centric ways of thinking and describing rural communities need to be replaced by pro-active thinking and statements. This is not saying that the issues and problems of rural communities should be glossed over and the ‘lily gilded’. Rather it is about recognising in a deep and profound way that rural communities which are productive, resilient and capable of regeneration are more likely than not to stimulate and support greater participation in higher education.

   In practical terms this would mean governments at all levels and the private sector, consistently advocating the place of small rural communities in the composition of a successful, modern, sustainable democracy.

2. **Country- City Student Twinning Program**

   The second set of actions should involve creating and funding extended opportunities for students attending rural schools, to engage in higher education pathway study and activities during the early formative periods of post school planning, ie during or before year 9.

   Funding is required to enable Country- City Student Twinning programs to be designed and implemented that focus on students in rural secondary schools and classes forming and sustaining relationships with students in large city based or regional schools, who are aiming to enter higher education. The
programs should include both in-situ and ICT based approaches to building greater numbers of rural students who actively seek a higher education option and who are ‘immersed’ in a wider network of peers where the expectation is one of ‘higher education being the next phase of life’.

3. Accommodation and Logistics Funding

The third group of actions need to deal with the logistical and resourcing factors embedded in being a student of a rural secondary school who has to relocate to the city or a large regional centre to pursue tertiary studies. Adequate funding for students to find and then pay for accommodation is required, with an additional incentive bonus available to students who agree to return to a rural community for an extended period during the first 3 years after graduation. Cost of day to day living is also an issue for rural students but this is also the case for urban students. The unique ‘burden’ that rural students transitioning to the city have to face, is finding and maintaining accommodation for the duration of their tertiary studies, as well as employment to meet their living and study expenses. Paradoxically, if they are successful in finding employment, this can then put a brake on relatively frequent returns to their home community.

4. Higher Education Mentors

The fourth action required to strengthen the likelihood of rural students progressing to higher education, is providing access to adult mentors who have a recognised tertiary qualification and are prepared to mentor a rural secondary student from year 9, desirably through to the end of the first year tertiary education. The mentoring would be aimed at complementing the arrangements of country-city twinning and also the work of local schools and communities. There are schemes already in existence such as VISE where retired educators provide additional support for rural and remote students, basically on a volunteer basis.

Establishing an adult-student mentoring program would require considerable set up costs in relation to recruiting and screening suitable mentors. Some ‘incentive’ to become a mentor should also be considered like covering basic costs of travel and communication as well as public recognition which is formally endorsed by government.

Summary

Rural students have to negotiate and resolve a range of complex and costly issues and barriers if they want to participate in higher education. As Australia moves forward to be a nation that is underpinned by a commitment to sustainability matched with practices that actually deliver it, all the nation’s talent will need to be appropriately energised and harnessed. It therefore makes no sense at any level, to lock out a significant proportion of Australia’s human potential and capacities by failing to ensure that rural students who want to participate in higher education and have the
necessary pre-requisites, can do so. The ideas briefly outlined above provide a substantial basis for immediately moving ahead as required.

References


Rural Education Forum Australia: Submission to the Parliament of Victoria Inquiry into Geographical Differences in the Rate in which Victorian Students Participate in Higher Education
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Appendix 1

Rural Education Forum Australia Members

- Australasian Association of Distance Education Schools Inc
- Australian Council of Deans of Education
- Australian Council of State Schools Organisations
- Australian Education Union
- Australian Parents Council
- Contact Inc
- Country Education Project Inc
- Country Women's Association of Australia
- Independent Education Union
- Independent Schools Council of Australia
- Isolated Children's Parents' Association (Aust)
- National Association for Rural Student Accommodation
- National Farmers’ Federation
- National Rural Health Alliance
- National Rural Health Network
- Remote and Isolated Children's Exercise Inc
- Rural and Remote Education Advisory Council (WA)
- Rural Skills Australia
- Society for the Provision of Education in Rural Australia
- The National Centre of Science, Information and Communications Technology, and Mathematics Education for Rural and Regional Australia
- Uniting Church Frontier Services