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

Submission prepared by
Win Scott
CEO
Sunraysia Institute of TAFE
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INTRODUCTION

This submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry into geographical differences in the rate in which Victorian students participate in Higher Education is made on behalf of Sunraysia Institute of TAFE.

There is no doubt that fewer students participate in tertiary education, both higher education and vocational education and training, in regional areas than in metropolitan areas. However it should be stated at the outset that the focus of the inquiry on higher education participation is problematic for a vocational education and training provider such as this one.

The results from On Track 2007, the annual report commissioned by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, indicates that 75.8% of 2006 school leavers across the state of Victoria are in study or training while 24.2% are not studying. The 75.8% comprises 46.1% at university and 29.7% in vocational education and training.

If 46.1% is quoted in isolation it provides a grim picture of post year 12 outcomes. It also perpetuates the notion that entry into higher education is a more valid outcome for post 12 students than vocational education and training.

However since the terms of reference specify an inquiry into higher education, this submission will address the key points provided.

Sunraysia Institute of TAFE has been committed to the delivery of higher education and vocational education in the region for nearly thirty years and this submission provides a brief overview of that commitment and then addresses objectives b), c) and g) of the review.

Background

The Sunraysia Institute of TAFE (the Institute) is the largest provider of vocational education and training (VET) in the north-west of Victoria. The Institute delivers 58.4% of the region’s government-funded VET training with the nearest competitor delivering 5.1%.

The Institute was established in 1980 – a time when there were limited VET programs available and no higher education (HE) programs available locally. As a means of providing HE as well as VET, the Institute has worked with partner organisations to provide HE programs for students in the region for over twenty years.
In 1986 the Institute entered into arrangements with the Ballarat College of Advanced Education to deliver the first year of its Visual Arts course at Mildura using the Institute's facilities and staff.

In 1987 the Institute commenced the delivery of the first year of the Bachelor of Business course with Bendigo College of Advanced Education in Mildura. Subsequently the range of courses expanded to include Teaching, Visual Arts and Arts with Bendigo CAE which subsequently became La Trobe University, Bendigo.

During that time Bendigo established its Extended Campus Network with TAFE Institutes in Mildura, Shepparton and Wangaratta. The model was based on local delivery by appropriately qualified staff, University staff secondments, video conferencing links and locally appointed University casual staff.


In 1996 La Trobe University, Mildura was established as a campus in its own right on the Sunraysia Institute of TAFE site and the relationship with the Institute developed further with a formal agreement to share facilities and services established.

The range of courses offered with articulation pathways from TAFE was expanded to include the Bachelor of Social Work and Bachelor of Teaching - dual recognition primary/secondary and the extension of courses to full three year degrees in Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Business.

In 2003 the relationship was renegotiated and an extensive agreement to cooperate was documented. Since that time the articulation pathways between the two Institutions has grown with the most active pathways being into the Bachelor of Education (articulation arrangement exist for six Diploma programs) and the Bachelor of Visual Arts (two Diploma programs). Other articulation pathways are currently being negotiated with the Faculty of Health Sciences and the Faculty of Law and Management (primarily business).

The Institute contributed a paper to the La Trobe University Review of University Regional Strategy Issues in 2006.

The Institute has also established formal articulation pathways for students who have completed a relevant Diploma with Deakin University, Charles Sturt University and Ballarat University.
OBJECTIVE TWO (b): INFLUENCES OF SCHOOL RETENTION RATES. INCLUDING ENROLMENTS AND COMPLETIONS FOR VCE, VCAL AND VET IN SCHOOLS ON PARTICIPATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Key points:

- VET in Schools is a valid pathway to tertiary education for students from regional and low socio-economic areas but funding remains a barrier
- Pathways from school to vocational education and training to university are critical for students from regional and low socio-economic areas as a means of overcoming perceived barriers to tertiary education.

VET in Schools

The On Track 2007 report indicates that enrolments in VET in Schools programs have steadily increased since 1994. There is also evidence that students who have undertaken VET in Schools programs are more likely to participate in higher education or vocational education and training. In addition it is clear that regional students and students in low socio-economic areas are more likely to participate in VET in Schools than students in inner-metropolitan areas.

The number of workforce participants with tertiary qualifications is lower in regional and low socio-economic areas as well. This can then become a barrier to participation in tertiary education for their children because of the lack of role models. Using VET in Schools as a pathway to participation in tertiary education is a positive way of increasing tertiary education for young people.

There is therefore an opportunity for stronger partnerships between secondary and vocational education and training providers for the provision of VET in Schools. However there are still barriers such as funding models to overcome.

Once a student has undertaken a VET in Schools program, the transition to further studies in vocational education and training and then to higher education is perceived as a more achievable pathway.

The links between sectors should be further promoted to demonstrate more clearly the articulation pathways that exist.
OBJECTIVE THREE: INFLUENCES OF PARTICIPATION IN OTHER POST-SCHOOL PATHWAYS, INCLUDING THE TAKE-UP OF APPRENTICESHIPS OR OTHER EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES, ON PARTICIPATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Key points

- Regional demand is one of the factors that influences enrolment in apprenticeship and traineeship courses
- Reports consistently indicate that employment demand will be sustained in the region in the areas of retail, business, building and construction, health services, metals and engineering and transport, distribution and storage as well as environmental management.
- Participation is low in regional Victoria in tertiary education – vocational education and training and higher education
- Pathways from vocational education to university are critical to ensure that regional demand is met for both vocational and higher education programs.

Demand

Planning for delivery in TAFE Institutes in Victoria is very much driven by demand. The Office of Training and Tertiary Education (OTTE), the funding body for TAFE, produces an annual analysis of demand for skills and in addition, Sunraysia Institute of TAFE has analysed a number of reports to ensure that the predictions are consistent.

The analysis indicates that there will be sustained demand for education and training programs (including apprenticeships and traineeships) in retail, business, health services, building and construction, metals and engineering and transport, distribution and storage and land, food and water management.

These vocational education and training courses all have articulation pathways to university. It is therefore critical that information is provided to students that demonstrates the transitional pathways from school to vocational education and training to university.

In spite of the regional skills shortages and availability of training places, the number of school leavers entering vocational education and training in regional Victoria is lower than in metropolitan areas (On Track 2007). Some of the factors that contribute to the low participation are the high proportion of disengaged young people who are early school leavers, the lack of adult role models and the low socio-economic factors that might force a young person to leave school early.
The drive to encourage young people to engage in tertiary education needs to commence at the earliest stages of their education – that is at primary and secondary schools. Strategies that include all sectors must be developed to increase participation across the board.
OBJECTIVE SEVEN (g): STRATEGIES TO ADDRESS ANY BARRIERS CONTRIBUTING TO GEOGRAPHIC DIFFERENCES IN PARTICIPATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Key points

- Monash and La Trobe universities are committed to delivering in regional Victoria but critical mass is an issue
- The population of the Mildura region is growing especially in the 10-19 age group
- Tertiary admissions centres would serve this region more effectively if they had common dates for the acceptance of offers
- Business growth has resulted in high demand for graduates in the region
- Opportunities exist to increase part-time and fee paying enrolments
- School leavers from other regions could be attracted to the Mildura campus
- Improved infrastructure to allow increased access to technology would increase tertiary options for students.

Critical Mass

Monash University has established the Mildura Regional Clinical School to provide medical training in the region. Students undertake a portion of their training in the region to gain experience of rural health and social issues. The University also conducts nursing training in the region.

Student numbers in nursing are a concern and there was some doubt at the end of 2007 about whether there would be an intake of students in 2008. The intake proceeded but the issue of viable numbers is likely to arise again with La Trobe University, Monash University and Sunraysia Institute of TAFE all doing nursing training there is an issue of critical mass for each provider.

La Trobe University (the University) has demonstrated a commitment to regional Victoria through its campuses in Bendigo, Albury-Wodonga, Shepparton and Mildura. This network of campuses provides learning opportunities for students in regional areas, adds diversity to the University, and through programs of regional engagement, contributes in significant ways to the development of regional Victoria.

In spite of the commitment of both universities, they must take the issue of critical mass seriously. In looking at the total pool of applications from school leavers for University places, data from the Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre (VTAC) indicates that over the
next three years, the number of Victorian students completing year 12 will decline.

The issue of student numbers could be addressed through stronger partnerships between the providers in the region. Whilst it is important to offer choice to students, there must be an awareness that the pool of applicants is limited and shared delivery models could ensure viability for all of the providers.

**Tertiary Admissions Process**

A further issue that impacts on year 12 applicants in this region is the state-based admission centres. For example the closing dates for acceptance of applications between the Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre (VTAC) and the South Australian Tertiary Admissions Centre (SATAC) differ and there are instances of students being pressured to make a decision through SATAC (which closes earlier) before they know the result of their application through VTAC. This is a particular issue in this region where Mildura is traditionally a catchment for Adelaide tertiary education institutions.

**Non Year 12 Applications**

The patterns of demand from non school leavers for education in the past should not be assumed in the future. Traditionally there are fewer people with higher education qualifications in regional than in metropolitan populations. However there is a ‘tree change’ phenomenon occurring in Mildura that has led to retail and business growth. The migration into the region is from metropolitan areas and the traditional demographic profile of the region is therefore changing. This may provide an opportunity for more part-time higher education enrolments or for fee-paying short course opportunities.

**Growing enrolments from other regions**

The other model for university enrolment that has not been explored extensively in Australia is the UK model where students traditionally leave their home city to study elsewhere. Whilst this occurs in Australia between the country and the city, it is not part of the culture for students to move from the city to regional areas to study. There is an opportunity in a region like Mildura that has extensive part time and casual work and an ideal climate to market to non-local applicants.
Technology

One of the barriers to increased tertiary educational delivery in the region is technology. Broadband access is an issue that hinders the delivery of on-line courses. The use of information and communication technologies for administrative and delivery functions is widely available in metropolitan regions but in remote regions like the north-west of Victoria, where it would enhance delivery, access is restricted.

The ability to provide delivery options to students is critically important and fast and reliable technology is fundamental to this requirement. Improved regional infrastructure would facilitate the use of technology to increase the course options

Win Scott
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