RAISING PARTICIPATION RATES IN POST-COMPULSORY EDUCATION: PERSPECTIVES FROM A REGIONAL PROJECT

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Abstract

The Council of Australian Governments (COAG 2009) and the Review of Australian Higher Education (2008) have established targets which propose that 90 percent of Australian 20-24 year olds will have attained a Year 12 or equivalent qualification by 2015, and 40 percent of 25-34 year olds will hold a Bachelor degree or above by 2025. These targets are significantly higher than current rates of participation and achievement in post-compulsory education in Australia.

The Skills Australia position paper *Foundations for the Future* (2009) proposes an education and training framework that builds a sustainable skills base through integrated national systems. The under-representation of Indigenous students, rural and remote students and people from low socioeconomic backgrounds in further and higher education, however, highlights the inequalities of existing provision. As a component of a Diversity and Structural Adjustment Fund (DEEWR) project, the author is carrying out research that explores sustainable educational pathways that can enhance participation in further and higher education for rural residents of the South-East region of NSW, many of whom belong to disadvantaged groups.

This paper illustrates disparities in the provision of vocational and higher education programs in seven regional towns. Through a series of community forums, the author distinguishes a number of barriers to post-compulsory education participation in these towns – including geographic isolation, low high school retention rates, limited educational pathways, market-driven policies and sectoral separation. Models to support the delivery of coherent, accessible educational programs in regional towns are presented.

Introduction

There is little argument that higher education 'confers significant personal benefit on individuals in terms of personal development, social standing, career possibilities and lifetime earnings' (Universities Australia 2008 p.1). Tertiary education, encompassing vocational diplomas and university qualifications, plays an important role in the development of *human capital* at both national and community level. As Lawson and Dwyer (2002) note, the gains from post-secondary education are compounded as regions with high levels of human capital encounter more rapid and sustained growth than other regions, attracting firms and taking advantage of economic development.

Australia has one of the highest rates of participation in tertiary education in the world, with 34% of Australians qualified at diploma, degree or post-graduate level (OECD 2009). Young people today benefit from increased access to tertiary education, with 41% completing a vocational diploma or above in 2007 (see Table 1). While a significant gap exists between current qualification levels and the educational

attainment targets established for young people, the statistics suggest opportunities for innovative pathways to degree programs for Australians of all ages.

Table 1. Australian population with a tertiary education qualification (2007)

Age group / Educational qualification	25-34 %	35-44 %	45-54 %	55-64 %	Australian population (25-64) %	OECD average (25-64) %
Vocational (Diploma +)	10	9	10	9	10	9
University (Bachelor +)	31	25	22	18	24	20
Total tertiary	41	34	32	27	34	28

Source: OECD 2009, Indicator A1

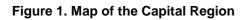*Regional participation in tertiary education*

Participation rates are not nationally uniform and reflect social, economic and political conditions in different states, territories and regions. James (2002) has found that Australians from lower socio-economic backgrounds are significantly under-represented in higher education. Indigenous Australians are not only less likely to complete Year 12 but are also less likely to complete a qualification when they do enrol at university (LSAY No. 17 2008). Rural students from low socioeconomic backgrounds suffer a double disadvantage (Universities Australia 2008). In recognition of the under-representation of rural and regional students, the federal government has set a university participation target of only 20% for this group, half that of the national target.

In the United Kingdom, local and regional higher education provision is being expanded through the new 'University Challenge' initiative, which has established a number of regional universities to offer locally based higher education. The aims include widening participation generally, attracting and retaining talent in the local area and driving local regeneration by 'unlocking potential of towns and people'. Cross-sectoral programs are encouraged and further education colleges are promoted as providing 'progression routes into higher education' (DIUS, 2008).

Vocational colleges and 'regional' universities in Australia are also supported with targeted funding to provide distributed tertiary education services. In reality, however, local provision of vocational and university courses is restricted to large regional centres. Recognising the 'haphazard' nature of regional provision, The Review of Australian Higher Education: Final Report (2008, p.110-111) proposed broad strategies to increase regional participation:

> 'Australia needs a sustainable system of higher education provision in regional and remote areas. Provision needs to be flexible and innovative. It must anticipate and respond rapidly to local needs. Providers in regional and remote areas need to be encouraged and supported to build upon partnerships with local communities, providers in other sectors of education, businesses and industry. Such arrangements will involve institutional cross-collaboration and partnerships, including sharing the use of facilities and resources.'

In March 2009, the Deputy Prime Minister commissioned the AQF Council to 'improve the articulation and connectivity between the university and the VET sectors to enable competency-based and merit-based systems to become more student-focussed' (AQF 2009). This initiative builds on the role of *Skills Australia*, established in 2008 to provide a training system 'that is driven by, and which responds to, the needs of business, industry and the economy' (Gillard, 2008). These vocational education and training reforms are designed to deliver customised, relevant training that works seamlessly across sectors and with other areas of government to meet the needs of learners and employers. In recognition of intergenerational poverty and clusters of disadvantage noted by Vinson (2007), additional training provision would be provided for both those who are under-employed and those who need to upgrade their employment skills.

This paper examines opportunities for access and participation in tertiary education for people living in seven rural towns within the Capital Region of NSW, surrounding the Australian Capital Territory (see Figure 1). The paper focuses on the reported barriers to post-compulsory education participation in the towns. We describe the range of educational opportunities currently available and present educational delivery models to support increased participation for those who have not yet achieved the targets set by the Government.

Figure 1. Map of the Capital Region

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Methodology

Research reported in this paper has been carried out as a component of a DEEWR Diversity and Structural Adjustment Fund project managed through the University of Canberra (UC). With the working title *Bringing learning to your community*, the project aims to enhance higher education participation and learning outcomes for students living in Goulburn-Mulwaree, Cooma, Snowy River, Eurobodalla, Bega and Illawarra regions of S-E NSW, especially those from low socio-economic backgrounds. The project extends existing UC entry programs that support disadvantaged students through targeted academic skills support and cross-sectoral credit arrangements.

The questions addressed in this paper are:

1. What factors currently inhibit participation in tertiary education for people living in selected regional towns?

2. What Regional Delivery Models (RDMs) would optimise tertiary education access and participation in these towns, while acknowledging and extending local infrastructure and community programs wherever possible?

Data collection and development of models

The data has been collected and analysed using interpretivist research methods. Data sources include project Steering Committee meetings, project-based planning meetings with TAFE NSW-Illawarra Institute and consultations held in communities of 2,000 – 23,000 residents. Formal community consultations were coordinated through Shire Councils, in partnership with TAFE NSW-Illawarra Institute, and encouraged input from business, education, community and government perspectives. A professional facilitator was employed to lead the half-day workshops and to ensure that all views were received without prejudice. Two UC staff captured views expressed at each workshop into computer files which were subsequently analysed to provide summaries of the following:

1. What are the top strengths of the Shire as a community?
2. What are the key educational needs?
3. What ideas for addressing these needs would the community like to explore?

Written communiqués that encapsulate discussions in each town were distributed and feedback gathered from participants. As follow up, individual and group meetings have been held with representatives of local high schools, NSW Department of Education and Training program managers, Shire Councils, government agencies, members of local youth forums, community representatives and other stakeholders. Data from all consultations has been coordinated with an educational design process to create generic regional delivery models that can be customised to suit local needs and conditions.

Findings and discussion

Regional communities are concerned that the perpetuation of low participation in tertiary education inhibits economic and cultural growth, increases unemployment and under-employment and accelerates the loss of young people from the towns. Commonly reported barriers to tertiary education participation in the region include: low retention rates at school; poor understanding of the benefits of education; a narrow range of educational programs available locally; limited local access to educational technologies, academic support and learning resources; poor transport services; and the cost of leaving home to study.

Concerns expressed by regional communities

A. School retention rates are low.

Poor retention and completion rates in high school were reported by all communities. Statistics reported by one Shire Council are summarised in Table 2 and illustrate the extent of educational disadvantage in the region. Fifty-three percent of people aged 15 and above in this Shire have not progressed beyond Year 10 at school.

Table 2. Highest level of schooling completed, one Shire Council (2001 census)

	Max. Year 9	Year 10	Year 11	Year 12	Still at school	No school	Not stated	All 15 yrs +
Shire %	22.3%	30.7%	8.7%	26.7%	3.4%	0.3%	7.8%	100%
NSW %	17.0%	26.8%	5.3%	38.0%	3.3%	1.2%	8.4%	100%

Regional communities express optimism that the mandatory requirement for young people to participate in schooling to Year 10, and to participate full-time in school and/or work to age 17, will boost levels of educational achievement. Research by Polesel et al. (2007) and others suggests that student satisfaction, school retention and positive transitions to post-compulsory education can be increased through the provision of vocational subjects in school-based programs. In the combined Illawarra/ South Coast region of NSW, over 55 % of students enrol in one or more VET subjects in senior high school; another 10% of students take vocational courses at TAFE and 20% take combined school and TAFE courses. The majority of those studying VET at school undertake a work experience placement (ibid p. 62).

Despite the potential of school-based vocational programs, however, transition outcomes for school-leavers in the Illawarra and South Coast region are poor. Table 3 compares student destinations for HSC VET students in Illawarra/South Coast and Sydney regions with the NSW average. Barely half of school leavers graduating with a VET subject in the region of study continued on to further education or training. Fewer than 30 percent enrolled in a course that would contribute to the achievement of a qualification at the COAG 90% target (Certificate II or higher).

Table 3. Destination of 2005 HSC VET graduates in Illawarra and South Coast region

HSC student destination	Illawarra/South Coast (% VET graduates)	Sydney (% VET graduates)	NSW (% VET graduates)
University	5.7	13.0	12.6
VET Certificate IV	12.8	28.0	18.4
VET Entry level	13.2	10.7	10.4
Apprentice	10.7	10.7	10.1
Trainee	9.6	7.7	7.4
Working full-time	17.4	16.0	16.8
Working part-time	23.1	12.3	18.6
Unemployed	7.5	1.7	5.7
Total	100	100	100
Continuing to education or training	52.0	70.0	58.9

Source: Polesel et al. 2007 p. 52

Overall, students graduating from school in this region are more likely than others to enrol in low level VET courses and to work part-time. They are least likely to

continue to university and most likely to become unemployed compared to students in other parts of NSW. Polesel et al. (2007 p. 51) suggest that 'lower rates of transition ... in the country may reflect lack of access to higher education and VET providers in some regions. This is particularly evident in the low rates of transition to post-schooling VET in the more remote non-metropolitan regions …'

B. There is limited understanding of and access to tertiary education.
Of the seven regional towns visited by the project, five have a TAFE campus and two have a 'TAFE presence', a designated building in which courses can be offered if there is sufficient demand. Ten qualifications at Certificate IV level are taught across the region, many delivered part-time or flexibly. The Certificate IV in Business Administration is delivered in all five TAFE campuses. Other Certificate IV courses offered in selected campuses include Financial Services, Human Resources, Tourism, Hospitality, OHS and Community Services. At four of the five campuses students can extend their studies to a diploma qualification, with the Diploma in Children's Services the most commonly offered. University Education Centres have been built in two towns to deliver undergraduate programs in Arts, Nursing and Business as well as post-graduate programs in Education and Management. In principle, the Education Centres are managed through collaborative arrangements between the host university, TAFE NSW Illawarra Institute and local high schools.

The establishment of regional campuses in towns with populations of 7,000 or less demonstrates the commitment of the tertiary education sector to enhance regional participation. However, the range of tertiary level courses offered in regional towns is considerably narrower than the range offered in urban areas, including those designated low socio-economic status. The separation of schools and TAFE campuses in country towns, with TAFE often located on the outskirts of town, limits opportunities for local residents to engage with vocational education and to appreciate the benefits deriving from tertiary education studies. Without a significant increase in post-compulsory student numbers, economic forces will further reduce the range of offerings in regional towns and participation targets will become even less achievable.

C. Access to technology, academic support & learning resources is limited.
Shire libraries become social and educational hubs where young people can gather to gain skills and work with technology. Librarians participating in this project have expressed concern about the limited support they can provide to their community. Most shire libraries have small resource collections and few computers with internet access. While TAFE libraries and university study centres are generally better resourced, their existence in a town does not raise community access to academic learning resources or educational technologies – as these services are only available to students enrolled in a learning institution. Limited access to TAFE/university libraries and computers further disadvantages rural communities that are struggling to raise educational attainment.

D. Transport services are poor.
Restricted local provision and limited transport services are major barriers to regional students' access to post-compulsory education. This project is working with the NSW Transport office to investigate transport and delivery arrangements that might mitigate geographical disadvantage in regional towns.

E. Costs of studying away from home are high.

The combination of narrow educational offerings and poor employment prospects in regional towns results in many young people leaving home to study elsewhere. As a typical example, one Shire participating in this study reports that 25 percent of people leaving the region are aged 15-24. As few of these students will return, the region experiences a negative demographic for young people and reports only 5% of the population aged 25-29 – half the state average.

Many of the young people participating in community forums expressed concern with the high levels of debt they would incur if they chose to go to university. Some noted that while parents might pay TAFE fees, university students become personally liable for a significant HECS debt. Those who leave to study elsewhere face the additional costs of relocation and accommodation, and the tightening of eligibility criteria for the Youth Allowance is negatively impacting on regional students who leave home to study. Such financial concerns can adversely affect the capacity of many tertiary students to study effectively (Universities Australia 2008).

Regionally based tertiary education provision can thus form part of a broader strategy to enhance access and participation for rural and regional students.

Strategies to raise regional access to and participation in tertiary education

In 2009, the University of Canberra introduced a number of entry pathways that provide flexible access to the full range of undergraduate degrees for both school-leavers and mature age applicants. Communities involved in this project have recommended four broad strategies for enhancing regional access, participation and attainment in tertiary education for people living in regional towns.

A.   Boosting educational aspirations and access to post-compulsory education.

There is strong community support for initiatives that increase school retention and thus increase the pool of students able to participate in tertiary education. Strategies to boost awareness of the benefits of higher education include: school visits to the UC campus; regional school visits by university lecturers and student mentors; workshops for school Careers Advisers; joint TAFE-University presentations and sponsorship of local careers days. To support mature age residents as well as school students, UC is investigating the feasibility of online delivery for academic skills modules in the 'Smart Study Passport' program with assistance from local tutors.

B. Creating pathways from school to further & higher education.

There is strong interest in cross-sectoral collaboration to define meaningful pathways from school to further and higher education. UC is collaborating with Shire Councils and with post-compulsory educational providers to align programs delivered in each sector and, wherever possible, with the business community. Building on extensive credit transfer arrangements already available to students entering UC, regional cross-sectoral programs are being developed for both joint and consecutive delivery.

C. Targeting students at risk, including Indigenous communities.

Shire Councils and community groups in regional towns are already providing significant support for talented students at risk of missing out on tertiary education – including scholarships sponsored through Rotary, The Smith Family and the Country Education Foundation of Australia (CEFA). The University is exploring strategies for extending this support through, for example, regional delivery of the 'Ngunnawal Foundation Program', designed for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who have not entered university with a Year 12 or equivalent. This program could be combined with the Indigenous Higher Education Pathways Program (IHEPP), a tertiary preparation skills program with an Indigenous focus, and Local Government sponsored community workshops.

D. Developing blended and technology-enhanced local delivery programs.

Seven regional delivery models are being developed in collaboration with local communities, TAFE NSW-Illawarra Institute and the University of Canberra's Teaching and Learning Centre. The models include joint TAFE-University delivery; tutorial support from local lecturers and tutors; intensive teaching blocks on-site and off-site; work integrated learning; and online-supported programs that use existing video-conferencing and computer facilities where possible. Supplementary academic support, mentoring and counselling services would be included in the models.
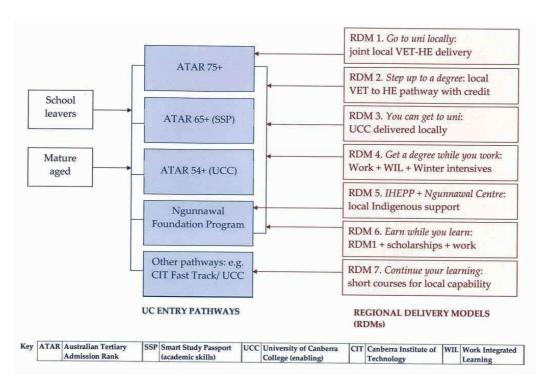
Figure 2. Models to enhance regional access to Higher Education

The Regional Delivery Models (RDMs) are underpinned by the following principles:
- The raising of the age to which students must be in full-time study and/or employment suggests new opportunities for cross-sectoral vocational programs.
- Educational attainment in regional towns is dependent on raising motivation, increasing Year 12 retention, developing meaningful education pathways from school to university and linking education with employment.

- While numbers of regional school leavers are not expected to rise significantly over the next decade, total demand for people with tertiary qualifications is expected to rise (Bradley et al. 2008); tertiary education for mature age students will fill this gap.
- Opportunities for access, participation and attainment must be optimised in the design of programs for regional students, especially for those with multiple categories of disadvantage.
- Delivery models must be sufficiently flexible to allow some customisation to meet the needs of different towns, as patterns of participation and success will vary across and between regions.

In combination with existing UC entry pathways, the RDMs aim to increase access for under-represented groups and enhance success and retention rates for regional students who enrol in tertiary programs. They are designed to fit in with the priorities of regional Shire communities, build on existing assets (education, government, business and community infrastructure) in the region, and specifically support educational participation for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Some educational solutions may be specific to one Shire; others might be delivered between towns, with issues such as transport addressed; others might involve programs that are delivered flexibly across the region. All will involve collaboration with schools, TAFE and communities to ensure that programs are taught by specialists and are optimised for students.

Conclusions

The Review of Higher Education noted that 'the most seriously under-represented groups (in higher education) are those from remote parts of Australia, Indigenous students, those from low socio-economic backgrounds and those from regional locations' (Bradley et al. 2008, Chapter 3:13). DEEWR Equity Performance Indicators reveal that the percentage of rural and regional students who participate in higher education has fallen slightly in the period 2003-2007 (DEST 2009), despite a range of government initiatives. The research activities and community consultations examined in this paper confirm that regional communities have to contend with high levels of underemployment, limited access to professional experiences, poor retention rates at school, a restricted range of locally delivered post-tertiary programs, limited local access to educational technologies and academic resources, poor transport services and additional costs associated with leaving home to study.

It is hoped that further development of the Regional Delivery Models, in collaboration with TAFE, Councils and regional community organisations, will create sustainable tertiary delivery in small towns in S-E NSW. When customised to meet the needs of other regional communities, the models can support current and future generations to meet tertiary education targets established by COAG and the Review of Higher Education.

Acknowledgements

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