



Charles Sturt
University

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES STANDING
COMMITTEE ON EMPLOYMENT,
EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Inquiry into the Education of Students in Remote and Complex Environments

6 March 2020

Office of the Vice-Chancellor
Charles Sturt University



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Mr Andrew Laming MP
Chair, House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Training
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Chair

On behalf of Charles Sturt University, I am pleased to provide this submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training for your inquiry into the Education of Students in Remote and Complex Environments.

Charles Sturt University is Australia's largest regional university, with more than 43,000 students and approximately 2,000 full time equivalent staff. We are a unique multi-campus institution with campuses at Albury-Wodonga, Bathurst, Canberra, Dubbo, Goulburn, Manly, Orange, Parramatta, Port Macquarie and Wagga Wagga – some of Australia's fastest growing regional cities – as well as various study centres located throughout regional and rural south-eastern Australia.

The University's commitment to inclusive, sustainable and prosperous development of rural, regional and remote Australia is informed by our unique research focus and the partnerships we have formed with each campus's local communities, neighbouring industry, and with the broader regions we serve.

Our experience, our mission and above all our strong community ties mean that Charles Sturt University is uniquely placed to comment on some of the challenges and opportunities facing students from remote areas, especially when it comes to their aspirations to higher education.

Our input to the Committee is focused on four key issues:

- the barriers that can discourage or prevent students in remote communities from accessing higher education, and how these can be overcome,
- the University's role in meeting workforce needs in regional and remote areas, drawing on our relationships with local communities and employers,
- the delivery of on-line education for people in remote areas, and
- the role of government in supporting the provision of higher education to remote communities.

Barriers to access

Recent challenges have highlighted Charles Sturt University's role in supporting regional communities. Over summer bushfires the University's campuses served as refuges for those evacuated from fire-affected areas, and as bases for those fighting the fires. For example, during November and December 2019 approximately 700 crew engaged in fighting fires around the Mid North Coast of NSW were housed in student accommodation at the University's Port Macquarie campus. The Wagga Wagga campus provided agistment for cattle, horses and sheep, from fire-affected properties, and is still providing treatment for domestic and native animals injured in the fires. These efforts were noted by Senator Perin Davey in a speech to the Senate on 11 February 2020.

During the bushfire crisis the University also provided regular updates and support services to students, staff and local communities, and introduced flexible study, workplace learning and assessment arrangements for students affected by bushfires – arrangements which build on or extend similar provisions for students whose families and communities may be struggling with prolonged drought conditions.

While none of the University's campuses came under immediate threat from the recent bushfires, many of our students are from areas that were directly affected. To help those students deal with the challenge of starting or returning to higher education after the bushfire crisis, Charles Sturt University is offering financial assistance to students experiencing hardship due to bushfires – an initiative also welcomed by Senator Davey. The scholarship scheme provides one-off, \$5000 grants to eligible students in any course at Charles Sturt, and at any campus. The scholarships are provided through the Charles Sturt University Foundation Trust, which distributes more than 300 student scholarships every year.

This kind of support can make a real difference to students from regional and remote areas, especially when year-to-year variation in family incomes can make the decision about pursuing higher education much harder. Students from regional and especially remote areas face greater cost barriers to higher education than their counterparts in metropolitan areas, especially in the form of long travel times or, for remote area students who want to study on-campus, the expense of relocating closer to a university. When these costs come on top of the accommodation and day-to-day living expenses all students have to deal with, the total can be the factor that deters them from university study.

Distance is also a barrier to access to higher education – not only because of the additional costs it can impose on remote and regional students, but because it reduces their awareness of higher education as an option. In his speech to the Universities Australia conference on 27 February 2020 the Minister for Education, the Hon Dan Tehan MP, made reference to a finding in a recent report from the Productivity Commission: "that school students who live more than 40 kilometres from a university campus are considerably less likely to go to university than school students who live in closer proximity." He also noted that this gap has widened over time, and that as a result the level of participation in higher education by students from remote areas has not improved over the last decade.

One way to help overcome this barrier is through outreach activities in regional and remote communities, such as Charles Sturt University's 'Future Moves' project. This project, funded through the Australian Government's Higher Education Participation and Partnership Program (HEPPP), is run by dedicated staff supported by 76 undergraduate student volunteers, who are trained through the project.

In 2019 the project engaged with 91 partner schools to deliver 65 events and 200 school workshops, resulting in almost 15,000 points of contact with school students. The project has had a noticeable impact on Indigenous students, who made up 17% of the participants and reported significant shifts in their awareness of, aspiration to, and likelihood of participating in higher education – as did other participants in Future Moves. The project was also successful in building participants' awareness of their future career options, and on the different pathways into higher education.

Charles Sturt University successfully bid for further HEPPP funding to build on the success of Future Moves in a project specifically targeted at students in remote and very remote communities. 'Beyond the Footprint' will engage with schools in Cobar, Bourke, Brewarrina, Walgett, Lightning Ridge, Narrabri, Coonabarabran and Gilgandra to deliver workshops intended to:

- improve awareness of future study and career options for primary and secondary students, their families and teachers,
- encourage more students in these communities to aspire to higher education,
- build students' confidence in their ability to undertake study at university,
- build students' understanding of the kind of courses available at universities, and the careers to which these can lead,
- increase application and enrolment rates,
- help students successfully transition to university study and progress in their studies, and
- improve retention and graduate rates for students from remote and very remote communities.

Based on our experience with Future Moves, Charles Sturt University is confident that the new Beyond the Footprint project will quickly deliver measurable improvements in participation in higher education by students from remote and very remote areas.

The Future Moves project has been useful in helping to overcome a third, well-recognised barrier to participation in higher education, being the first in the family to attend higher education. Had all the students who participated in the project gone on to university, two-thirds of them would have been the first in their family to do so. Such students often experience a kind of 'impostor syndrome': a sense that they do not belong at university, that they are less capable of meeting the challenges of their studies. These feelings can be exacerbated by relatively lower levels of attainment for students in regional and remote areas. First-in-family students are often less likely to ask others for help, and likely to take poor results much harder than their fellow-students. And as is the case for many other students from regional and remote areas, they may have to struggle with these challenges away from the support of their family and friends.

Charles Sturt University has a strong track record in supporting first-in-family students. The 2018 *Good Universities Guide* gave Charles Sturt a five-star rating for our support for first-in-family students – a result based on student feedback.

Regional workforce needs

As a university based in and focused on regional areas, Charles Sturt has an important role in meeting the needs of employers in regional and remote communities, and especially in meeting workforce gaps in education, health and other professions. The University has been very successful in meeting these needs: on average 80% of our on-campus students, and 75% of our online students, go on to work in rural, regional and remote areas.

Our track record in producing graduates who meet regional employment needs has led Charles Sturt University to tackle one of the most persistent challenges for communities in rural, regional and remote areas: attracting and retaining doctors. Charles Sturt has teamed up with Western Sydney University to establish the Joint Program in Medicine, delivered through a new medical school based at the Charles Sturt University campus in Orange.

The Joint Program has been facilitated by Federal Government funding as part of the Murray Darling Medical Network, and has been deliberately designed to provide more doctors for rural, regional and remote communities.

The rationale for setting up this program in a regional centre is strong: evidence shows that when medical students are trained in regional areas, they are far more likely than metropolitan-trained students to go on to practice their profession in rural, regional and remote areas. The likelihood increases even further if those students are from outside a metropolitan centre.

The University's new, innovative and world-leading engineering degree is another example. The program was developed in response to community and industry needs, and it has been implemented in partnership with employers across regional NSW and beyond.

Engineering at Charles Sturt involves three semesters of on-campus, problem based learning followed by four years of hands-on work with employers via paid cadetships. Participants work four days per week and continue their study on-line. This approach appeals to students, many of whom choose the Charles Sturt engineering program because of the workplace elements and because it means they start earning sooner. It also meets the immediate needs of employers. Around a third of the 40 cadets currently participating in the program are in positions that would be vacant but for the Charles Sturt engineering program, and some are in positions that were intended for graduate engineers. The University's innovative approach led MIT to include Charles Sturt as one of the four 'emerging leader' case studies in a 2018 report, *The Global State of the Art in Engineering Education*.

Online delivery of much of the program allows students from regional or remote communities to stay in those communities. Since the program can deliver content on-line and on demand, it can also support the professional accreditation and development needs of engineers working in regional and remote areas,

making work in such areas more attractive to engineers who want to stay registered, keep their knowledge up-to-date, and maintain their connections with their wider professional community.

The Charles Sturt engineering program also involves an outreach agenda to attract more students to the field and to help address the well-known 'pipeline' issues in the profession. The University is Bronze Partner in the national Power of Engineering program, which involves one-day events for Year 9 and 10 students who have not yet selected subjects for their final years of high school study. Charles Sturt sponsors challenges at events in regional NSW and the program has been successful in attracting students to the University's engineering course: a third of our 2019 intake reported that they would not have considered engineering as an option without the outreach program.

The University has the capacity to build on this and similar initiatives, to increase participation and attainment by students from remote areas, and to continue to meet the needs of employers across regional and remote NSW and beyond. However, the continuing cap on Commonwealth Supported Places imposes a firm limit on the University's ability to meet growing demand for higher education and for skilled graduates in regional and remote areas.

Charles Sturt University suggests that the needs of students, communities and employers in rural, regional and remote areas can be better met either by removing the cap on places in universities with a strong presence outside major metropolitan centres, or by providing additional funding to them.

Online study

The Charles Sturt University engineering program is built around online delivery of content, as are many other courses offered by the University. In 2018, more than 57% of Charles Sturt University students studied online. Those from remote and very remote areas make up only a small part of the total – 595 students in 2018, around 2.5% of all online students and only 1.5% of the University's total enrolments – but these are remote areas students who would not be able to pursue higher education without access to online courses. For comparison, in 2018 only 154 on-campus students came from remote and very remote areas.

These figures show that for students in remote and very remote areas, the provision of high-quality online courses is essential to their higher education and career aspirations.

Effective online learning depends on access to high-speed, reliable and affordable broadband. Meeting this goal will require investment and capacity building over several years. In the short term, the needs of many online and on-campus remote and very remote area students can be met by boosting investment in and connectivity to Regional University Centres, such as those proposed for Dubbo and Wangaratta under the Australian Government's Regional University Centres Program.

The Wangaratta Regional Study Centre is a partnership between the Goulburn Ovens Institute of TAFE, Country Universities Centre Ltd, La Trobe University and Charles Sturt University. The Centre is intended to boost access to and equity in tertiary education and training participation for students in the Ovens and King Valleys region. The Centre will provide access to all online courses offered by any Australian higher education provider, as well as administrative, welfare, learning and support services for students. The Centre will also offer videoconferencing and computing facilities underpinned by the high speed internet access already in place. This would build from the University's existing presence in Wangaratta on the TAFE site.

The Dubbo Regional University Centre is more explicitly focused on meeting the needs of students and communities in remote and very remote areas, especially around Orana and western NSW. The Centre is a partnership between the Orana Joint Organisation, Charles Sturt University and The Exchange, a Dubbo start-up and co-working space established in the disused former post office and telephone exchange. The Dubbo Centre is intended to address the barriers of distance, cost and confidence by providing assistance and support for students from remote areas enrolled in courses at any tertiary education and training provider in Australia. Again, this would build from the University's existing long-standing presence in Dubbo.

As in Wangaratta, many of the services that will be provided by the Dubbo Regional University Centre – and in particular the learning and training opportunities – will be underpinned by the existing high-speed internet access. While the Dubbo campus is already well-served by AARNET, the NSW Government is currently

examining the possibility of establishing a regional data hub in Dubbo to increase the capacity, speed and accessibility of internet services in the region and beyond, an initiative that would greatly expand the educational opportunities in western NSW.

Charles Sturt University is backing both proposals as part of our wider commitment to improving access to, participation in and completion of higher education for students from rural, regional and remote areas.

Government support for education in remote and complex environments

As noted above, the barriers to remote area students' participation in higher education are well-known, and there are many examples of successful initiatives, such as those delivered by Charles Sturt University, that can help students overcome the barriers. Government has an important role in ensuring that these efforts continue. The Australian Government has already made initial steps through:

- expansion of Regional University Centres,
- the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program,
- Rural and Regional Enterprise Scholarships,
- expanded availability of sub-bachelor places for rural and regional students, and
- adjustments to the Independent Youth Allowance.

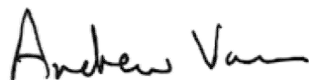
The Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education (the Halsey Review) and the subsequent development of the National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy, led by the Hon Dr Denis Napthine, have provided a clear path forward for government, communities, schools and universities.

Charles Sturt University wholeheartedly agrees with the key recommendations of the Napthine Review, and urges further government policies and initiatives to allow the University to expand to meet demand. The University notes that the Government has accepted the aims of the seven key recommendations of the review, and has begun to address them through some of the initiatives mentioned above, but there is clearly scope and need for further action.

In particular, the Australian Government should consider ways to remove barriers to growth for universities in regional areas, recognising they can provide increased access to students from rural, regional and remote areas, improve post-graduation outcomes for those students, and address critical workforce shortages outside major metropolitan centres.

Charles Sturt University is committed to working with government, schools, employers and regional communities to ensure the best outcomes for students, their families, and the nation, and we look forward to the Committee's report on its inquiry into the education of students in remote and complex environments. I would be very pleased to provide further information to the Committee on any of the issues covered in this submission, and would be available to provide evidence at any proposed hearings that that Committee may undertake on the matter.

Yours sincerely



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