

# **SUBMISSION TO THE BRADLEY REVIEW OF AUSTRALIAN HIGHER EDUCATION**

## **WELLINGTON SHIRE COUNCIL'S (SALE, VICTORIA) STRATEGY FOR ADDRESSING UNDER REPRESENTATION AND INEQUITY IN RURAL AND REGIONAL AUSTRALIA**

### **1. Introduction**

This submission by Wellington Shire Council has been prepared on the basis of work carried out over the last year investigating the higher education situation in Gippsland.

This region consists of six local government areas (of which Wellington Shire is one) stretching from Warragul to the NSW border. The region has a dispersed population with a number of urban areas, none of which is comparable in population to the major provincial cities in Victoria, e.g. Bendigo. The work to date indicates that there is a need for a new approach to higher education in Gippsland, for example the percentage of the workforce with a University qualification is approximately half of the Melbourne metropolitan figure.

The submission covers the higher education situation in Gippsland, Council's concerns and response to the situation, a possible model of a new kind of post compulsory education institution and a change in higher education regulation to allow implementation of the model. The strategy underlying this model is aimed at addressing the issues raised by Questions 6,8,9,15,16 and 29 of the Discussion Paper.

### **2. Summary of the Higher Education Situation in Gippsland**

The higher education situation in Gippsland is characterised by relatively low enrolments compared with other parts of country Victoria, e.g. in western Victoria. Although there is a branch campus of a major metropolitan university in Churchill in the Latrobe Valley, a very low percentage of Gippsland university entrants choose to go to this campus. The Council's investigations to date indicate that the reasons for this overall situation include:

- A culture of low educational expectation and aspiration;
- The cost of relocating to attend university in Melbourne;
- Low level of Year 12 completion;
- Greater attraction of course offerings by metropolitan universities; and,
- Logistics problems in accessing the Churchill campus.

Of these it would appear that one of the key reasons is the culture of low educational expectation and aspiration. The causes of this culture are not clear (James R, Bexley E, Maxwell L 2008); however it should be noted that Gippsland has a relatively high proportion of people with low socioeconomic status and indigenous backgrounds. The other key reason appears to be the cost of relocating outside of Gippsland.

### **3. Wellington Shire Council's Concerns and Response**

The Council's concerns with the higher education situation in Gippsland are both social and economic. It believes that there is potential to improve the higher education situation in Gippsland so that:

- Participation rates in higher education are increased;
- The number of graduates who stay in the region after graduation is increased;
- There are greater opportunities for life-long learning; and,
- Regional development outcomes for Gippsland are improved.

To this end the Council has formed a Roundtable of stakeholders drawn from education, business, community organisations and local government. The role of the Roundtable is to act as the patron of a project to investigate the feasibility of establishing a new kind of post compulsory education institution. The Executive Committee of the Roundtable provides direction to the project on a regular basis. To date the project has involved:

- A preliminary investigation of potential demand and tertiary education cost structures;
- A review of trends in community college education in North America;
- A preliminary investigation of educational expectation and aspiration;
- The development of the "community university" model;
- Identification of potential centres of excellence;
- The development of a strategy to address the low levels of participation; and
- Discussions with potential strategic partners.

### **4. "Community University" Model**

Wellington Shire Council recognises that any new kind of post compulsory education institution in Gippsland needs to be:

- Responsive to the culture of low educational expectation and aspiration;
- Part of a wider collaborative post compulsory educational system;
- Centrally located to provide easy transport access;
- Relatively low cost; and,
- Relevant to the skill and economic needs of the region.

In addition the institution needs to have a degree of local autonomy to facilitate the achievement of regional education and economic development objectives. Achievement of these objectives would involve the establishment of centres of excellence relevant to Gippsland such as high value agriculture, forestry and fishing and aviation training. These centres of excellence would offer graduate programs.

The key features of the "Community University" model that the Council is currently developing to meet the needs listed above are:

- A three academic years post Year 12 curriculum compatible with the Melbourne Model;
- A first year with a strong Foundation Studies emphasis (for some students this may involve two calendar years of study as with the proposed program for indigenous students at The University of Melbourne);
- A curriculum combining a broad university education with a strong emphasis on mathematics and English with a nested VET qualification;
- An outreach program involving all secondary schools in the region;
- A program of tutorials, mentoring, counselling etc. to address the problems of the high failure/drop out rates often experienced in regional universities;
- A quality assurance and governance system under the patronage of an existing regional university and supported by a strategic alliance of educational providers and research organisations and by the wider community of stakeholders;
- A teaching program supported by a range of educational providers;
- Shared teaching facilities with the new East Gippsland Institute of TAFE campus in Sale (which is centrally located for the whole of Gippsland); and,
- A non-residential "communal university experience", e.g. with a well-resourced tutorial system for all students, for which a separate fee of the order of several thousand dollars will be charged to cover the relatively high cost structure per student of a regional campus. This fee would be an order of magnitude less than the cost of relocating outside of Gippsland. This separate fee system could be supported in the future through the establishment of an education trust. It is anticipated that the non-residential "communal university experience" would help to address the culture of low educational expectation and aspiration in Gippsland.

## **5. Change in Higher Education Regulation**

Council understands that the higher education regulation system would need to be changed to allow the charging of a separate fee for the non-residential "communal university experience" described above in order to implement the above model.

## **REFERENCE**

James R, Bexley E, & Maxwell L, 2008, *Participation and equity. A review of the participation in higher education of people from low socioeconomic backgrounds and indigenous people*, March, Universities Australia, Canberra

Wellington Shire Council  
24 July 2008