

This submission is presented on behalf of the Geraldton University Access Group (GUAG) in response to a *Review of Australian Higher Education Discussion Paper*.

GUAG sees the role of the Geraldton Universities Centre in the Mid West as a vital contributor to the regions' progress and development. It is concerned that for the last 18 months increased university participation has been stifled by inadequate resources which diminish incentives for Universities to deliver an increased number of courses to our region. Also of concern is a tendency to greatly diminish the "high touch" component of course delivery.

GUAG requests that negotiations within future funding arrangements include incentives that are sufficiently generous for city based Universities to happily serve the regions.

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Background

Geraldton University Access Group (GUAG) Membership

GUAG consists of the following members, each of whom represent key stakeholders within the Geraldton and Mid West community:

Wayne Hosking (Chair)	CEO, Geraldton Fisherman's Cooperative
Tony Brooker (Vice Chair)	Retired Principal of Geraldton Grammar School
Steve Cooper	Academic Director, Central West TAFE
Steve Douglas	CEO, Mid West Development Commission
Neil Bennett	Community Development Manager, City of Geraldton-Greenough
Wade Kalajzich	Mid West Chamber of Commerce & GUAG Treasurer
Garry Simmons	Principal, Geraldton Senior College
Jenny Kuhn	District Director, Mid West District Education District Office
Laurie Andrews	District Director, Mid West District Education District Office
Priscilla Clayton	ASKAP Regional Manager, CSIRO Australian National Telescope Facility
Janette Brennan	Industry Member & GUAG Secretary
Peter Shaw	Community Member & former member of the GUC Board
Grant Woodhams	MLA, Member for Geraldton
Angela Drury	Combined Universities Centre for Rural Health
Simon Forrest	Executive Officer, Aboriginal Employment, Education & Training Council
Sheila Flanagan	Community Member & former GUAG Secretary
Meredith Wills	Director, Geraldton Universities Centre

The role of GUAG in the development of the Geraldton Universities Centre

By the mid 1990s access to university education in Geraldton and the Mid West had been a community concern for many years. Apart from Nursing, Visual Arts and Indigenous Studies delivered through special arrangements with Central West TAFE, little was available other than external studies through a range of Australian Universities.

A youth forum conducted by the Mid West Development Commission (MWDC) in 1999 identified the lack of access to university education as a key issue for the region. In March 2000 GUAG was formed to investigate the issue.

GUAG received a report on enhancing access to university education for the Mid West regional area and subsequently approached all West Australian (WA) universities but none would commit without the allocation of fully funded places.

In 2001 GUAG gained \$135,000 from the Higher Education Innovation Fund to investigate an appropriate model for the Mid West region. A GUAG delegation travelled to Canberra to lobby for twenty places (pipelined) to be given to Geraldton.

In August 2001 the Federal Minister (Dr Kemp) announced that 20 places had been identified for Geraldton. This set a national precedent.

DETYA invited all Australian Universities to tender to deliver courses in Geraldton and in November 2001 Dr Kemp announced that a UWA, Curtin and ECU consortium had won the tender. The GUC was established and the Universities began offering courses in Geraldton from 2002.

In March 2004 an Agreement was signed by the three consortium Universities, Central West TAFE and GUAG outlining the way in which each partner would cooperate to constitute the GUC. The GUC Board oversees the operations of the GUC with members from each of the partner Universities, Central West TAFE and GUAG, with a State Ministerial nominee as Chair.

Initially the GUC was co-located within the Combined Universities Centre for Rural Health (CUCRH) with many classes being held in Central West TAFE facilities, but in February 2006 a new purpose built centre was officially opened. The \$4m cost of the new building was met predominantly from Commonwealth funds, with the State providing land, some start-up funds and substantial funds for site preparation. The City of Geraldton and Shire of Greenough (now amalgamated) and Central West TAFE and provided significant in-kind support with equipment, materials and personnel to assist during construction, as well as landscaping, pedestrian and vehicle access to the site. At the Regional Hospital's suggestion the Minister for Health ceded hospital land to the Minister for Education for the GUC site.

Funding of Regional Higher Education

The GUC is experiencing difficulty in persuading Universities to increase the range of higher education programs in our region. GUAG is deeply concerned at partner universities' moves to deliver online with little or no face-to-face contact with students. We understand that the Universities' rationale for both these stances is that regional delivery is not economically viable.

While surveys reveal that online delivery of lectures can be preferred by metropolitan and regional students, face-to-face tutorials are imperative for regional students who need the contact no less than metropolitan students. Poor rates of take up and success associated with external studies underline the need that students have for face-to-face contact with peers, lecturers and tutors.

The goal of the community in establishing the GUC was to secure regional delivery in Geraldton with "*high tech-high touch*" as a guiding principle. This was the community's challenge and was the inspiration for the creation of the GUC. While we accept the advantages of increased use of "*high-tech*" we are concerned when significant inroads are made into "*high touch*".

Geraldton and the Mid West does not have a lack of potential students, but a lack of courses to meet regional needs. For example, local independent research shows a strong and sustainable demand for the introduction of a Business Accounting degree (refer Appendix 1a/b), and yet the regional loading is not sufficient for our partner universities to commit to provision of the program.

The nationally accepted view that regional delivery of Higher Education costs more than metropolitan delivery must not be lost. The fact remains however that the current Regional Loading arrangements are inadequate for regional WA and further disadvantage regional students and communities.

One size does not fit all

The *Review of Higher Education Discussion Paper* refers to the concept of 'compacts' negotiated with Universities by the Commonwealth.

This submission to the Review highlights inequities perceived by our region and draws attention to the need for regional funding to be part of a broader compact. For equitable, viable and sustainable regional delivery, funding needs to allow city based Universities to negotiate levels that not only cover the costs associated with regional delivery but take into consideration the requisites of individual courses and individual regions.

The *Strategy for Higher Education for Regional Residents of Western Australia* suggests that the Commonwealth is not meeting its funding responsibility, particularly in regional higher education provision. University Vice-Chancellors have suggested that the loading for students further than 300 km from a University should be between 30% and 60%.

Being all too aware of the difficulties that can be caused by solutions imposed from afar, we strongly support a comment in the *Strategy for Higher Education for Regional Residents of Western Australia*, attributed to Dr Murray Lake, Chair of the Ministerial Council on Rural and Remote Education, that: "Control should be returned to the community with outside agencies providing a supporting role rather than a dictating role".

We acknowledge that the number, nature and variety of courses offered in regional centres must be limited by financial considerations, but we strongly assert that the quality of delivery and assessment in Geraldton has been comparable with metropolitan courses. This is currently under threat seemingly because of the universities' perception that regional face-to-face delivery of content tutorials is not financially viable.

Cost Shifting

We assert that it is common for commentators to fail to recognise the extent of cost-shifting that occurs when a regional student leaves home and moves to Perth for University study.

If we were to take:

- 33% as a reasonable estimate of the regional loading excess from a centre over 300 km from the metropolitan university.
- \$12,000 as the approximate cost of a place
- ... then the per student excess cost (33% of \$12,000) borne by the university, or more properly the Commonwealth, would be \$4,000.
- The extra cost to the student/family of relocating is reported to be between \$20,000 and \$25,000, exclusive of HECS commitments.

Thus by delivering in Perth the Commonwealth/university saves \$4,000 while the student/family carries an extra burden of about \$20,000.

This cost-shifting must be partly responsible for low participation rates, and given the relatively low average Socio-Economic Status (SES) of the regions it is difficult to reconcile with a vision statement embracing equity of access.

It should also be pointed out that currently the equivalent of 100 F/T students are studying at GUC. If these students were forced to relocate to Perth to continue their studies then they would represent a direct 'leakage' of around \$2M annually from the local economy (100 students x \$20,000). The impact is even more significant if indirect (multiplier) impacts are considered.

Equity Requirement

Equity demands that the participation rate in regional WA is enhanced. This will only happen when a funding regime makes it attractive and viable for extant Universities to deliver courses in the regions.

Strong Regional Partnerships - Academic Pathways

The Geraldton experience is one of very strong community input through GUAG. The result of this has been a phenomenally high enrolment intake over the initial five years compared with WA regional centres of similar size. The wide ranging nature of the membership of GUAG strengthens GUC linkages with the broad Mid West community resulting in strong dialogue with the community.

Partnerships between Central West TAFE, CUCRH, the five Geraldton-based secondary schools (Geraldton Senior College, John Willcock College, Nagle Catholic College, Geraldton Grammar and Strathalbyn College) and the GUC focus on improving academic and physical pathways between the institutions.

As VET pathways between schools, TAFE and industry increase, new opportunities for universities to negotiate articulation and advanced standing will become viable and sustainable. We highlight the GUC's strong partnership with our regional TAFE College, Central West TAFE. Together our organisations undertake bridging programs, publicise university pathways and facilitate the delivery of university programs in the region.

GUC partnerships with schools and TAFE are further enhanced by the commitment and support of the Mid West Development Commission, the Geraldton Universities Access Group, the Combined Universities Centre for Rural Health and the Mid West Chamber of Commerce. The input of these entities play a critical role in linking community, industry, indigenous groups and federal, state and local government to the GUC.

The GUC also provides a focus for community activities with industry and community organisations using the GUC facilities to conduct workshops and training sessions. GUC also hosts a Community of Practice project in collaboration with CUCRH and Central West TAFE. The project links researchers and postgraduate students , providing support at a local level.

The WA State Cabinet recently met in Geraldton. At a community function the Premier of WA predicted unprecedented economic and population growth for the Mid West. This boom increases the potential for exponential growth in higher education in the Mid West region and the capacity of the GUC to work collaboratively within our strong partnerships to provide linkages and evidence for Universities and TAFE to increase regional participation in further education.

Raising aspirations and perceptions

The Geraldton Universities Centre provides tangible evidence of raising aspirations and perceptions for attaining higher education degrees in the Mid West. The physical presence of a stand-alone building not only influences general public and industry perceptions about the availability and attainability of university education for the regional community but also enhances the status and self-esteem of university students themselves.

Indigenous Participation in Geraldton

Kurongkurl Katitjin, an Australian Indigenous Studies arm of Edith Cowen University, is now located within the GUC facility. Kurongkurl Katitjin students have become an integral part of the GUC community, and their presence at the GUC has raised the profile of University study within the Indigenous community and is providing an attainable goal for Indigenous school students. .

Evidence of success

The GUC is now in its seventh year with 160 students currently enrolled. To date 93 GUC students have already graduated and of these the majority remain in the Mid West or in other regional areas. These graduates who work in professions such as teaching and nursing are helping solve regional staffing issues.

Third Stream Activities: GUC's contribution to regional economic, social and cultural capital

In the 2005 Strategy for Higher Education for Regional Residents of Western Australia it was noted that "A university presence....builds human capital and produces graduates with skills that are in high demand in the regions".

The Mid West Development Commission (MWDC) continues to support and be actively involved in the GUC because the Commission's view is that higher education delivery is not only compatible with regional development objectives but indeed is a major determinant of it. For this reason MWDC has been a major driver / supporter of the GUC, the Separation Point Marine Precinct and the establishment of the Murchison Radio-Astronomy Observatory (and its associated Facility Support Centre) in the Mid West.

CSIRO have submitted a proposal to the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Works to site the Australian SKA Pathfinder Radio Telescope Support Facility containing significant computer technology on the GUC site. This project is increasing the profile of science at a high level which is already resulting in significant positive consequences such as the forthcoming Mid West Science Summit hosted by the MWDC and Professor Lyn Beazley, WA's Chief Scientist.

GUAG also recognises education, training and R&D as an important economic driver in its own right. Research programs at the Combined Universities Centre for Rural Health (CUCRH) have shown the way in doing relevant research in a regional area. As well as the intrinsic value of the research and the local employment of post-graduate academics, research grants have brought millions of dollars to the region.

Conclusion

GUAG sees the role of the GUC in the Mid West as a vital contributor to the regions' progress and development. It is concerned that for the last 18 months progress has been stifled by inadequate resources which diminish incentives for Universities to deliver an increased number of courses to our region. Also of concern is a tendency to greatly diminish the "high touch" component of course delivery.

We believe that negotiations within compacts should include incentives that are sufficiently generous for city based Universities to happily serve the regions.

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References

A Discussion Draft Prepared by the Interdepartmental Committee for the Minister of Education and Training, December 2005, *Strategy for Higher Education for Regional Residents of Western Australia*

Appendix

- 1 GUC Proposed Commerce Degree Study: Interim Reports
 - a. Findings from Industry Interviews
 - b. Findings from Surveys