

4 February 2019

Dr Denis Napthine
Chair
Regional Education Expert Advisory Group
Department of Education and Training

Via email: regionalstrategy@education.gov.au

Dear Dr Napthine

Swinburne University of Technology welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Regional Education Expert Advisory Group's framing paper, released in December 2018.

Swinburne is pleased that the expert panel has identified that regional students are more likely to engage in off-campus study, and that online learning is an effective way to enhance educational access for regional students. Further, we concur that lack of access to high-speed internet can, in certain circumstances, present a barrier to online study.

As the paper identifies, people living in major cities are four times as likely to participate in higher education as their regional counterparts, and are twice as likely to participate in vocational education and training (VET).¹

Online education

For certain rural learners, on-campus study at a university is a practical impossibility, which has historically impeded access to higher education for many.

For most, access to high-speed internet has largely overcome this tyranny of distance by providing access to an increasing array of online higher education options. While earlier models of distance education involved minimal contact with teaching staff and few opportunities to discuss the curriculum, modern online education connects students and teachers, and students with their classmates in fully immersive ways only made possible by recent technological advances.

¹ *Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016*



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While much has been made of the apparent higher risk of attrition of online study, research from the Grattan Institute finds that when controlling for other factors, the risk of dropping out of off-campus study was only 2 per cent higher than on-campus study.² Work, children, family responsibilities and juggling study and life commitments mean that part-time learners often do not follow a linear progression from start to finish of their qualification. Swinburne strongly believes that such learners should be encouraged to pursue higher education by the means most convenient and practical for them, rather than precluded from study.

The technical skills developed during online study are well known, and online study is also a perfect environment to hone the soft skills required for future work roles such as; communication, working in virtual teams, time management, keeping motivation when working independently and remotely, critical thinking and creative problem-solving.

Swinburne Online

Swinburne Online is a joint venture between Swinburne and Online Education Services (OES) to deliver higher education and VET programs to students around Australia. Through Swinburne Online, we have been able to significantly increase our offering to regional and rural students. 21% of our online students access our courses from a rural or regional setting, compared to roughly 10.4% of our on-campus students who join us from the country. We believe this access is vital, and the popularity of and satisfaction with this delivery is a testament to the fact that these are quality, accredited courses with content developed and approved by Swinburne's Academic Senate.

In an increasingly digital world, the importance of online education will only grow, and Swinburne is pleased that through our status as Australia's largest university provider of online education, we are creating opportunities for students which previously did not exist. Swinburne and OES strongly believe that online education plays a significant and often underappreciated role in overcoming the barriers which have led to the lower participation rates of rural and regional students seen at all levels of education. Online education has the additional benefit of enabling regional students to stay located within their communities whilst they study without the associated travel and location costs of attending an on-campus location. For regionally based students, placements and industry-based projects can be supported in regional locations, furthering the connection between Higher Education and regional communities.

In order to provide a highly connected experience for online students, Swinburne Online ensures 24-hour response times from tutors via a dedicated online platform, and opportunities to discuss and interact with both academic staff and fellow students via purpose-built units that foster social engagement as a key part of the learning experience. In addition, Swinburne Online provides general educational, administrative and technical support via telephone, chat and email seven days a week over extended hours, to ensure our non-traditional cohort can access the support they need outside of traditional working hours. Swinburne University support services such as disability support, financial support and counselling are also made available to Swinburne Online students either online or via telephone.

² *Cherastidtham and Norton, University attrition: what helps and what hinders?, Grattan Institute, 2018*

Scholarships and ICT infrastructure

Swinburne commends the Government's scholarship programs for regional learners. In addition to our online opportunities, Swinburne offers Access 1st Year Undergraduate Scholarships for rural and regional students commencing university studies. These awards are designed to assist with study-related costs and are based on social disadvantage and financial need.

Rural and regional students are much less likely to attend university than their city counterparts, mainly due to financial obstacles. Those who do are also more likely to defer for one or more years after school in order to work and save money to fund their living expenses when they leave home. Scholarships and grant programs for rural and regional students can assist with transport, accommodation, course fees and unexpected hardships.

While it is certainly clear that much has been done by both Federal and State Governments to improve access to information technology in rural locations, a continuing challenge that must be met in order to fully capitalise upon the revolution in online learning that is taking place is improvement in affordability for users. Swinburne believes that equitable access to quality content in online delivery is essential, and Government has a further role to play in ensuring the provision and maintenance of community ICT infrastructure.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1

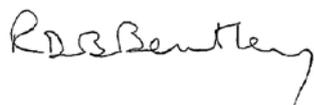
That the Panel acknowledge and support the important role of online education in providing educational opportunities to regional, rural and remote students.

Recommendation 2

That the Panel give consideration to infrastructure and ICT investments which will provide greater access to tertiary education for regional, rural and remote students, particularly those for whom on-campus study is not a practical option.

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to Expert Panel's framing paper. I would be pleased to discuss Swinburne's response further at any time.

Yours sincerely



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