

TREATING RURAL EDUCATIONAL AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC DISADVANTAGE BY BETTER REGIONAL PLANNING AND INVESTMENT FOR GREENER DEVELOPMENT

A SUBMISSION ON THE PRODUCTIVITY COMMISSION (PC) DRAFT RESEARCH REPORT ENTITLED ‘VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING WORKFORCE’ (2010)

This submission on the Productivity Commission (PC) draft research report entitled ‘Vocational Education and Training (VET) Workforce (2010)’ provides the solution for a key equity issue which is addressed in chapter three of the report but ignored in the report draft findings. In the light of the history of Australian government concern about the effects of educational disadvantage in rural and poor communities, one wonders how the PC could have found the following example of its own advice so unremarkable:

The distribution of VET trainers and assessors, however, does not align with the distribution of VET students, at least based on enrolments in the publicly-funded VET system. In more remote areas, the ratio of trainers and assessors to students tends to be lower. For every 100 students in major cities, there are 26 TAFE and 80 non-TAFE trainers and assessors (data not shown). These ratios are roughly halved in remote and very remote locations (p. 3.6).

The PC does not explain ‘data not shown’. However, draft finding 7.1 is that consistent national data about the size and characteristics of the VET workforce is lacking. It is also noted that lack of quality data hinders effective policy making and workforce planning at any level and undermines efforts to improve the capacity and capability of the workforce.

It is vitally important that comparative rural and socio-economic disadvantage and data driven management to remove this are addressed in the light of consideration of the most effective relationships between rural and urban life and between VET and research. The VET sector also requires consideration in the light of developments in universities, where students also seek careers in health, construction, education, environment protection and other areas vital for social, environmental and economic improvement. The related World Health Organization (WHO) direction is addressed later in related regional contexts.

The attached discussion of a national communications strategy which links education, entertainment and related promotions more effectively with industry and community interests was presented to the Minister for Innovation, Industry, Science and Research’s Book Industry Strategy Group. It outlines the holistic, quality governance directions necessary for governments to take in partnerships with industry and related regional communities in order to implement a comprehensive strategy for effectively securing Australia’s place in the emerging digital economy and greener development. VET should support this open educational direction which is crucial to improve the comparative quality of life in rural areas generally and particularly for teachers and students needing more effective support.

The attached submission on recent student discontent at Sydney University argues that the National Tertiary Education Union policy of seeking a fixed ratio between insecure and secure academic jobs hinders the growth of quality education. This union policy compares unfavorably with the struggle of NSW nurses calling for more clearly defined ratios of nurses to patients, to promote higher quality of care. The attached submission makes the following recommendations, among others, which ideally apply nationally:

1. Make education managers manage rationally to grow the business and to cheapen and improve the quality of education and research for sustainable development
2. Put subject content on-line and administer subjects to maximize economies of teaching and related administrative scale and jobs for PG students and others
3. Maximize student choice in regard to subjects they are allowed to undertake

The above direction is consistent with the current PC draft recommendation 7.3 which states, among other things, that technical and further education institutes should be able to select the mix of employment arrangements, supported by contemporary human resource management practices that best suits their business goals.

Open education and maximising student choice are vital to encourage more students to enter more easily into all areas where there are skill shortages, as well as being necessary to produce greener development effectively, rather than trendier versions of the past. For example, an Australian Financial Review article 'Engineers demand to see a plan' (8.12.2010, Business 8) states the National Engineering Taskforce seeks implementation of a student demand driven system to alleviate engineering skills shortages. Later discussion of the WHO direction demonstrates the problem of capture by old producers.

Related discussion is also attached about planning developments in the Sydney suburb of Glebe and student work in the Master of Architecture, Bachelor of Design in Architecture and Bachelor of Design Computing at Sydney University. At their recent exhibition, students produced many beautiful drawings and models, supported by comparatively lyrical writings to address concepts they presented. However, this gave the viewer little idea of their capacity to serve government regulatory requirements; to address engineering and construction constraints; related materials and labour availability; or any other commercial realities necessary to make their projects attractive to potential investors. Students and residents of the City of Sydney could benefit greatly if students assisted the Council in solving many practical problems which exist in our surrounding environment. The recommended management partnerships are even more urgent in rural areas because skilled labour shortages are often more acute, which increases the cost of development.

A discussion of the PC draft report 'Rural Research and Development Corporations' is attached because research and VET are ideally considered in effectively coordinated ways. The PC noted the paucity of reliable data that is available on spending across the rural R&D framework. It made excellent recommendations for better and fairer

management and data capture by governments on one hand and by the business sector on the other, to clarify their respective research funding sources, aims, performance outcomes and accountabilities. The PC argues the primary aim of government funding is ideally to enhance the productivity, competitiveness and social and environmental performance of the rural sector and the welfare of the wider community by inducing socially valuable R&D (p. xxxvi). VET is ideally considered in related contexts.

Crucially, the PC finds it would not be appropriate to establish a target level for overall spending on rural R&D – nor a target for rural R&D intensity. Rather, it expects funding and investment should emerge from assessment of all the various programs through which governments currently contribute funding to rural R&D, to judge them against the primary aim of government funding. Superficially, this PC direction appears to challenge the old ‘efficient markets hypothesis’ which has traditionally driven development. It reflects instead the new global paradigm where all social and environmental goals are not assumed automatically to be achieved best in market operations. This regional planning approach also has implications for discussion of how risk is ideally to be treated. Issues related to levies that businesses may or may not make to support R&D are addressed in this context in the attached. VET development may be ideally understood in related regional contexts in which comparative rural disadvantage is also recognised and treated.

The WHO Declaration of Alma-Ata, primary health care ‘involves, in addition to the health sector, all related sectors and aspects of community development, in particular agriculture, animal husbandry, food, industry, education, housing, public works, communications and other sectors; and demands the coordinated efforts of all those sectors’. The WHO approach to healthy action sees all work, play and related living as located in regional communities and environments from which risks and many related environmental challenges arise and are accordingly prioritized for preventive and remedial action. The identification and control of the major risks to health are ideally conducted in these regional contexts. The approach to handling environmental risk and other social risks are ideally treated in coordinated ways - in relation to rural educational disadvantage, for example. Think globally, act locally and address the VET workforce in supporting regional contexts to serve VET consumers and all related communities better.

The WHO direction is constantly in danger of being captured by older special interests. This is discussed in the attached consideration of events at Sydney University which also addresses the National Health and Medical Research Council video ‘The Best Laid Plans’. This video shows how bureaucrats and professionals may impose closed questionnaires on communities in a process which ignores their real wants and needs in order to construct a building which houses a bunch of health professionals instead. All the controlling politicians and workers are then happy. The building industry can construct the building and the health professionals can fill it full of their own in order to continue with their apparently central mission of inviting us all to become more like narrowly self-interested invalids with a right to be dependant. The preferable alternative is to assist people to gain work and related training and education to become more independent, responsible and contributing adults, who are capable of work and enjoyment

without depending on sitting at the feet of expensive, key professionals who may be far away. The national broadband network is very important in assisting this development.

Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission and provide attachments.
Yours truly, Carol O'Donnell, St James Court, 10/11 Rosebank St., Glebe, Sydney.
www.Carolodonnell.com.au