

New models of tertiary education inquiry
New Zealand Productivity Commission
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Rural Women New Zealand

Submission on 'New models of tertiary education inquiry'

Introduction

1. Rural Women New Zealand ('RWNZ') is a charitable member based organisation that reaches into all rural communities and advocates on issues that impact on those communities. We welcome the opportunity to comment on the Productivity Commission's ('the Commission's') issues paper on 'New models of tertiary education inquiry'.

Overview of our submission

2. RWNZ strongly supports the need for an inquiry into new models of tertiary education. Access to adult learning opportunities in rural New Zealand remains severely limited, with tertiary education providers having little or no funding incentives to enhance their reach into these communities. We believe that improved financial supports for rural students and changes to the current funding arrangements are necessary to address these financial and geographical barriers. Funding for Adult Communication Education should also be restored to previous levels to further enhance opportunities for ongoing adult learning in rural New Zealand.
3. The low number of students graduating with degrees in agricultural based subjects also suggests that there is a mismatch between tertiary education and the demand for skilled workers in primary production. New Zealand's future wealth depends on productivity and export growth in the agricultural and primary production areas. Future skill/staff shortages in the agricultural sectors will effect the realisation of these productivity goals. The Commission's inquiry should include a

focus on ways to promote greater collaboration between government and industry in skilled shortage areas.

4. The challenges and issues in rural areas we outline above must be key focus of the Productivity Commission's inquiry. This is not about special treatment for rural people, this is about acknowledging the unique barriers that both providers and users of education services face in a rural context. We expand on these points below.

Achieving equity of access for rural New Zealand must be a key focus of the Commission's inquiry

5. The Education Act specifically identifies "*fostering and developing a tertiary system that achieves equity of access*" as a key objective of New Zealand's tertiary education system. The reality is that this objective is not being met in rural New Zealand, where access to adult learning opportunities remains severely limited.
6. The fact that the majority of tertiary providers are located away from rural areas, creates real financial and geographical barriers of access for rural New Zealanders. Lower socio-economic and migrant populations, are particularly affected because they cannot afford the costs that are involved with travelling and relocating for study purposes. RWNZ believe that students from rural, remote areas, should qualify for additional government support to address these barriers.
7. In addition, we think that new models of funding may be necessary to better incentivise and support tertiary education providers to reach into rural communities. The current funding approach relies on economies of scale, which is difficult to achieve in a rural context. Providers should be eligible for additional funding where it can be identified that they are meeting unmet educational needs in rural areas.
8. There has also been a significant reduction in the number of Adult Community Education courses in rural areas since the withdrawal of government funding in 2010. Data from the Ministry of Education (2014) indicates that the number of enrolments in ACE courses overall has significantly decreased by around fifty percent since these funding cuts. The decline in the number of female enrolments is especially concerning. In 2007, there were 49,765 female students enrolled in ACE, whereas in 2014 there were just 16,670 (MoE, 2014).
9. RWNZ feels strongly that the benefits of Adult Community Education should be better recognised by the current tertiary education system. Adult Community Education courses play a valuable role

in strengthening social cohesion in rural communities, promoting personal development and providing opportunities for rural people to build basic literacy and numeracy skills. For many rural people these types of on-going learning opportunities provide a vital stepping-stone towards higher models of education. RWNZ recommends that government funding for Adult Community Education is restored to previous levels.

Issues with connectivity in rural areas must be addressed before a shift to online models of education

10. While a government shift towards remote/online models of learning could, in theory, assist in overcoming issues with access in rural areas, the reality is that the level of Internet available in rural areas may not be adequate to support this goal. Even once the Government's Rural Broadband initiative is complete, 34,000 people in rural areas will still only have access to the slower and more expensive copper network. In other rural areas, Internet access remains limited to satellite or dial-up. These issues with connectivity must be addressed before a shift towards models of online learning. Failure to do so could only exacerbate further existing inequities.

The lack of graduates completing degrees in agricultural studies, suggests a mismatch between the tertiary education system and employer demand for skilled workers.

11. New Zealand's future wealth depends on productivity and export growth in the agricultural and primary production sector, yet of the 20,000 degree graduates New Zealand produces every year only 80 are in agriculture (Rowarth, 2012). Future skill shortages in these areas will compromise future export growth, productivity and innovation in these sectors. We think that the shortage of graduates completing degrees in agriculture is an example of a broader mismatch between the tertiary education system and employer demand for skilled workers.
12. The Commission's inquiry should include a focus on ways to promote greater collaboration between the government and industry in skill shortage areas. Additional government funding may also be necessary to attract students to enrol in skill shortage areas.

We would be pleased to speak/discuss this submission with you.

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