

Improvement in regional education is essential to facing the challenges that confront the nation, writes **Ian Goulter**

AS Australian higher education moves to a full student demand-driven funding model in 2012, several uncertainties remain. The Bradley report on the Australian higher education system set out a range of challenges around sustainability and growth for regional higher education provision requiring innovative thinking about the future.

Denise Bradley concluded that "Australia needs a sustainable system of higher education provision in regional and remote areas", rightly characterising this as a national priority rather than a regional issue.

The federal government's response has placed firmly on the agenda the objective to widen participation in higher education by 2020 and to develop a more highly qualified workforce by 2025. But how can this be achieved, particularly outside metropolitan areas?

If the government is to meet these national targets, regional Australia cannot afford to lose any of its university campuses. It should build on that presence and expand its reach to other communities in the coming decades.

Why? Almost 40 per cent of the population resides in rural and regional Australia and yet rates of participation are less than half that of people in metropolitan areas. Where a university campus exists in a regional town, participation rates rise dramatically in comparison with areas without a campus.

Charles Sturt University can contribute to meeting the national targets for greater participation in higher education and a more highly qualified workforce through sustaining the presence we have. More important, we aim to work more closely with TAFE and others to expand accessibility and provide genuine choice to students across regional communities.

A national broadband network will help but is not sufficient on its own to lift access and participation. Both geographic and cultural lines of sight to the opportunity and accessibility of higher education are required.

My argument is not just about social inclusion. It is also about the importance of regional Australia to national economic health. More than 50 per cent of Australia's export wealth is generated from the trade in commodities produced largely in rural and regional areas. About 60 per cent of Australia's land mass is engaged in agricultural production, while 65 per cent of Australia's continental water supplies are managed by farmers.

With the challenges of climate change, food security, water security and biosecurity, giving regional populations the skills to improve water management, sustain biodiversity and enhance farming and mining practices is critical to national environmental as well as social and economic wellbeing.

It is as important as engaging regional populations with research that can be translated into sustainable practice on the ground.

While much of the talk about the big issues facing our nation occurs in Canberra or the state capitals, it is easily forgotten that the solution for many of these challenges lies in the hands of rural and regional communities.

The solution can be found in education. Charles Sturt University has been addressing the challenge of widening participation levels and developing professional workforces, particularly in regional communities, since its inception 20 years ago.

The idea of forming a new type of national university was first mooted by the university in its submission to the Bradley review in August 2008. This idea was further refined with Southern Cross University and received strong endorsement as one of the 46 recommendations arising from the Bradley report.

Education Minister Julia Gillard subsequently endorsed this concept with her decision to provide \$2 million in funding to explore the opportunity. There was a shared view that we

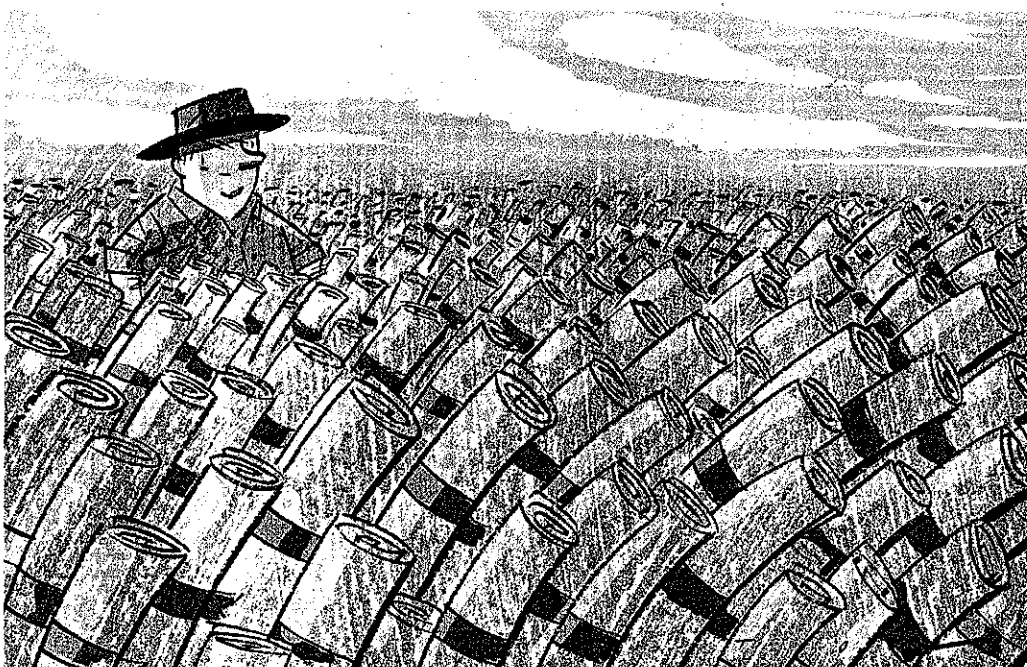


Illustration: Tom Jellett

We need to think outside city squares

needed to look beyond the old models of regional higher education in regional areas to an approach based on strength and growth.

Last week's announcement by Southern Cross University that it would not continue to participate in the study reflects its assessment of the needs analysis prepared by PhillipsKPA. The entitlement of any participant in the study to withdraw was built into the process.

Although many have expressed disappointment at the decision, it would be wrong to think the challenge of higher education provision outside metropolitan Australia has gone away.

The larger challenge for the federal government, and for regional communities concerned about the sustainability of higher education provision in their local area, relates less to what needs to be done than to creating the momentum to do something.

As any higher education minister over the past 20 years will argue, getting universities to embrace change is possibly the greatest challenge facing higher education. The tendency of universities to wait and see is well known.

In a globally competitive world, what developed country would waste the intellectual and creative capacity of almost 40 per cent of its population?

For a nation confronting serious global challenges relating to climate change, food security, water security and biosecurity, what country would invest less than 6 per cent of its research and development dollars in the communities generating more than 50 per cent of the country's export wealth and managing more

than 60 per cent of the nation's land and water supplies? The need for investment in the creativity and capacity of rural and regional communities has not gone unnoticed among our leading competitors. The European Union is investing heavily in programs to tap into the rich vein of talent and innovation in its rural communities.

US President Barack Obama has just begun a rural tour of America with his cabinet, recognising that, like Australia, "a healthy American economy depends on a prosperous rural America". In Britain, last year the government announced funding for 20 new campuses across regional areas to improve participation and reap the national return on investment that higher education and research generate.

So, what is the plan for regional Australia and its regional higher education needs?

As Bradley noted in her report: "Within the

university sector there is informal acknowledgement that regional provision in many localities is close to unsustainable because of the cost."

The historic model of support for regional providers to be sustainable not only limits the available course and research opportunities for all regional communities but, through the fragmentation of funding, actively works against the creation of world-class universities in regional Australia.

As Bradley suggested, and many across the sector acknowledge, in a more competitive, student demand-driven environment, some universities in regional areas will become unviable.

Even if the government committed half of the newly announced structural adjustment funding exclusively to universities located in regional areas, this would be worth an average of about \$5m a year over four years for each regional university.

Will this promote the creation of competitive, world-class universities in Australia?

It is time for new thinking and new ideas.

Is the formation of a new national university with critical mass, a broad course profile, research depth, national reach and a diverse income base a possible solution?

The early conclusion of the study, before the feasibility of the creation of such an institution could be considered, means we may not know.

What we do know is that there are numerous models for universities and systems in regional locations that have been successful in building high-quality education provision regionally and nationally. In framing a new approach to regional higher education, it is time to explore what has demonstrably worked in Australia and in other countries.

Ian Goulter is the vice-chancellor of Charles Sturt University.

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