

SUBMISSION TO VET FUNDING REVIEW

BACKGROUND

Regional Cities Victoria (RCV) was formed as an advocacy body in 2000 to represent the whole of regional Victoria. Regional cities are at the heart of regional Victoria and by improving their infrastructure and liveability, they help to grow and support wider regional and rural communities. RCV comprises the cities of Ballarat, Bendigo, Geelong, Horsham, Latrobe, Mildura, Shepparton, Wangaratta, Warrnambool and Wodonga.

As regional hubs, these cities support surrounding districts through the provision of education, health, financial, transport and social services, as well as retail, sport and recreation, cultural and tourism amenities and activities.

RCV's vision is *building a sustainable Victoria through regional growth*, an important aspect of which is ensuring a vibrant and sustainable higher education sector in regional Victoria which has the capacity to respond effectively to community and industry needs. As such RCV has a keen interest in the outcomes of the VET Funding Review.

RCV congratulates government on its initiative in undertaking the review and welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission.

MATCHING TRAINING DELIVERY TO EMERGING JOB OPPORTUNITIES AND LOCAL NEEDS

Given Victoria's economy is in transition, a key matter of concern for RCV is ensuring that courses provided within the higher education system at the regional level reflect emerging industry employment needs. RCV encourages the development of new industries and would like to see increased funding for re-skilling and training for specialist roles.

With effective partnerships between state and local governments and the private and community sectors the higher education facilities, if adequately funded, are well placed to deliver programs aligned to industry needs. This will enable people, particularly younger members of the community, to live, study and work within their communities in turn building boosting regional economies.

Victoria's ten largest regional cities have a combined population of nearly 800,000 people, which is expected to increase to almost 1.1 million by 2031.¹ Across the state, the population of regional Victoria is projected to increase to 1.86 million by 2036; home to around 25 per cent of Victorians.² In order to meet the education needs of these growing communities, improved access to higher education is critical.

¹ Implications of Population Growth on Infrastructure and Resources in Regional Cities, 2012, Essential Economics

² Regional Growth Fund, State Government of Victoria

(http://www.rdv.vic.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0006/188322/RGF-6295_12pp-BOOKLET_web.pdf)

BUILDING A STRONG AND RESPONSIVE TAFE SECTOR

Given the significant changes which have occurred over recent years, the sector would benefit from the opportunity to consolidate and strengthen without major additional change at this time.

Due to the changes experienced, training providers have reviewed delivery methods in order to make programs more affordable. This has, in some cases, impacted on the quality of programs. As a result, increased compliance and audit requirements are being placed on private Registered Training Organisations and TAFEs.

Training institutions need to be adequately funded to enable them to respond innovatively and effectively to the diverse needs of regional and rural communities. Regional areas have the added complexity of lower enrolment numbers. This presents difficulties when endeavouring to fund and deliver tailored programs that are formulated on the basis of full class sizes, for smaller communities.

ACCESSIBILITY

Victoria's regional cities act as hubs for their immediate catchments and surrounding municipalities. On behalf of RCV, the City of Greater Bendigo undertook a study in 2014 into the wider regional benefits of investment in regional cities. Amongst other interesting insights, this study highlighted that a high percentage of enrolments in higher education facilities in some regional cities are drawn from regional catchments, particularly in areas such as Bendigo and Gippsland.

Retention of students in smaller catchment communities is critically important for the economic and social well-being with the regions. Disengagement is a very real possibility given the complexity of travel and remote learning. The change in subsidy rates has also made some courses unaffordable for many students in remote locations.

Given the extent of travelling involved from more remote rural communities, access for these students would be enhanced through improvements to transport corridors across regional Victoria and improved public transport options between and within regional cities.

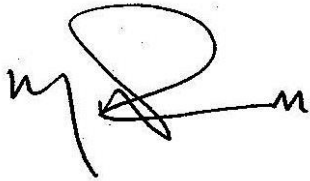
Clearly, improved broadband access would remove a current barrier to access, by enabling more students from remote areas to undertake online learning. This would also reduce the travel and accommodation costs for students.

RCV is concerned that without adequate funding which is genuinely matched to the true cost of providing quality, accessible higher education services, the barriers to those who are disadvantaged may remain.

CONCLUSION

RCV strongly supports the need for sustainable higher education institutions throughout regional Victoria which are appropriately funded to enable the agility and innovation required to address the needs of emerging industry. Ensuring training opportunities are accessible to more remote communities across the wider catchment areas is important for the economic and social well-being of the wider Victorian community.

RCV would be pleased to meet and discuss further its views on the needs of regional and rural Victoria regarding funding for higher education facilities.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M Neoh', with a large, stylized loop at the top.

Cr Michael Neoh
Chairman
Regional Cities Victoria

10 April, 2015