



Supporting the Contribution of Higher Education Institutions to Regional Development

Peer Review Report:

Sunshine-Fraser Coast, Australia

David Charles, Scott Bowman, Steve Garlick and Lyn Tait

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background: OECD/IMHE review

This review of Sunshine/Fraser Coast in Australia is part of the OECD/IMHE project entitled Supporting the Contribution of Higher Education Institutions to Regional Development which embraces fourteen regions throughout twelve countries in 2005-2006. The IMHE thematic review project was launched as a response to a multiplicity of initiatives across OECD countries to mobilise higher education in support of regional development. The aim was to synthesise this experience into coherent body of policy and practice to guide higher education institutions, and regional and national governments. At the same time, the IMHE project was designed to assist with capacity building in each country/region through providing an opportunity for dialogue between HEIs and regional stakeholders and clarifying the roles and responsibilities.

Review process

The Peer Review drew on a self-evaluation process guided by an OECD template. This asked HEIs to critically evaluate with their regional partners and in the context of national higher education and regional policies how effective they were in contributing to the development of their regions. Key aspects of the self evaluation related to: the contribution of research to regional innovation; the role of teaching and learning in the development of human capital; the contribution to social, cultural and environmental development and the role of the HEIs in building regional capacity to act in an increasingly competitive global economy.

The Sunshine-Fraser Coast self-evaluation process was initiated and coordinated within the University of the Sunshine Coast with participation and part funding from the University of Southern Queensland (Wide Bay), the local authorities of Caloundra, Maroochy, Noosa, and Cooloola, private sector representatives, and Sunshine Coast Business Council. The self-evaluation had a strong focus on mutual learning and capacity building. The OECD review visit took place in October/November 2005. The Peer Review Team - David Charles (United Kingdom), Lyn Tait (Canada), Scott Bowman (Australia), and Steve Garlick (Australia) - met national, state, and local government representatives, intermediaries, representatives of key business and public sector agencies, and the universities.

Universities and regional engagement in Australia

The governance of universities in Australia is divided between the State and Federal Governments. Individual universities have a high level of autonomy. While national funding supports teaching and research, there is little funding for regional engagement except through locally funded projects.

Region: The Sunshine-Fraser Coast

The Sunshine-Fraser Coast is a rapidly growing region located to the North of Brisbane in South East Queensland. It consists of coastal communities typified by a focus on tourism, recreation and service provision and inland hinterland that comprises the key arterial road links and a declining agricultural base. The population growth is mainly based on the relocation of people from elsewhere in Australia seeking lifestyle changes. The dependence on new arrivals supports an economic structure that is limited to construction and personal services. The companies in the region are mainly small or medium sized. The economic structure, with its emphasis on subsistence and low cost and lack of internationalisation, has a relatively modest skills requirement.

The region is not clearly defined in policy terms. Hence, there is no single tier of government or governance, but multiple local authorities within two regional groupings. There is consequently a need for better regional intelligence and a clear vision to which the local universities should contribute.

There is lobbying for expanding local provision of higher education and a desire for multiple campuses, particularly by those areas in the region without an existing campus, mainly to retain young people in the region. At the same time, there is a problem of a shortage of job opportunities for graduates in the region.

Universities' contribution to the region

The region has two, relatively young, campus-based universities, the University of the Sunshine Coast (USC) and the Wide Bay campus of the University of Southern Queensland (USQ), plus some small provision by other universities around the fringes of the region. Overall, the region has a low level of provision in terms of student numbers.

A core contribution from the universities is through labour markets and locally oriented courses. There is strong local support for this

role and development of placements and internships. This activity should be expanded.

Both universities are developing a regional research focus, but from a low base. National and state funding is limited and oriented to the more established metropolitan universities. Local resources to support research are also limited although there have been some successful partnerships such as the one between USC and the Kingfisher Bay Resort.

USQ has strengthened the formation of a town centre in Hervey Bay and is well connected with local services through shared community facilities. Both universities are developing local partnerships and cultural contributions, but are limited by their youth and scale as well as by local resources.

In spite of resource difficulties and wide-ranging demands from the region, the universities have a strong culture of responsiveness and an entrepreneurial attitude. Processes are being developed in the universities in order to sustain this, including the development of suitable reward systems to encourage staff members to remain engaged. New organisational structures are also being developed by USC with a Regional Engagement Committee at the heart.

Regional vision

While there is a strong potential role for the universities in building the knowledge economy, there is an absence of a clear regional vision. Considerable effort is being devoted to developing institutional visions and leadership with regional engagement at the core. USC has a strong vision to build a Knowledge Precinct and is working with Sunshine Coast strategic bodies on this. Care is needed to ensure that other communities also benefit from the presence of the university.

As yet, there has been no collective action involving both universities. There is a need for more creative targeting of policy resources within the region on university-community partnership to benefit the region.

The Peer Review Team's key recommendations

- Improve incentive structures at the national, regional, and institutional levels to support the regional engagement of the universities and their staff.
- Develop region-wide collaboration and shared strategies, including inter-university collaboration to support the knowledge economy agenda.
- Link an international component to regional strategy especially in terms of growing and making good use of international students and links in partnership with local firms and agencies.
- Develop existing partnerships.
- Create better gateways for local SMEs to access the universities.

- Expand student entrepreneurship programmes.