Comments on the CountryWay proposal: A proposal for a class of special entry admission for rural students in the Faculty of Agriculture

Introduction

The CountryWay proposal refers to the proposal that rural applicants for admission to undergraduate degree courses in Agriculture at UWA be considered on the basis of both the TER (with a reduced TER course cutoff) and performance in an interview. This paper makes some methodological points with regard to the CountryWay proposal and provides a summary of results of IRU investigations that are relevant to the proposal. Also presented are some supplementary data relevant to the possible broadening of the CountryWay scheme to include other faculties.

Miscellaneous comments on the CountryWay proposal

The objective. Lowering the cutoff from 79 to 76 seems like a relatively weak way of rectifying a low participation rate. An alternative approach could be to try to find out why rural students who have, or could have, TERs between 79 and 100 are not applying.

The interview. When it is proposed for any course that there be considerations for admission in addition to the TER (as with the interview for admission to Medicine and Dentistry) it could be expected that the nature of the interview and what it would measure would be described in detail, that evidence would be provided that the type of interview envisaged was a significant predictor (beyond the TER) of success in the degree course, and that the proposed weight to be applied to it was appropriate. In the absence of such information for the interview component of the CountryWay proposal it is difficult to support its use in selecting students for admission to Agriculture courses.

It is stated in Point 5 of the proposal that "It is believed the use of these enhanced selection criteria will indeed result in the selection of students with a likelihood of success as least as great as the marginal students selected into courses elsewhere in the University on the basis of TER alone". If this belief has a sound basis, a description of it would have added significant support to the CountryWay proposal.

Equity. Even if the predictive capacity of the interview was established, an equity issue arises in the CountryWay proposal if applicants are competing for a limited number of places because it is being proposed that borderline applicants (with TERs in the mid to high 70s) and above-borderline applicants (with higher TERs) be assessed in different ways.

The solution. It would seem to be logical, more equitable, simpler and cheaper to use the TER alone and simply lower the cutoff for rural applicants (if possible) to a level that research shows would still result in a tertiary performance at least as good as that of marginal metro entrants.
Lowering the TER cutoff for rural applicants: Results of IRU investigations

Performance in first year at UWA (all faculties combined)

IRU investigations in 1993 and 1996 suggested that at higher TER levels rural students may perform better at university than metro students but at lower TER levels the converse may be true. In subsequent investigations in 1999 and 2000, it was found that the overall average Weighted Average Mark (WAM) of rural students in first year at UWA exceeded that of metro students, but, importantly, that there was an interaction between School Location and TER: below TERs of about 88 (TESs below about 335) the predicted performance of rural students is below that of metro students, for a given TER. This finding is illustrated below in the plot of the predicted Weighted Average Mark in first year at UWA versus TES.

Conclusion: The overall rural advantage in first year at UWA, therefore, is due to the strength of this effect in the upper half of the TER range; below a TER of about 88, first-year performance of rural students is predicted to be below that of metro students, for a given TER.

Performance in first year at UWA in individual faculties

Inspection of the data for individual faculties showed that the pattern of results illustrated above also existed in Science and Engineering courses and in the Medicine, Dentistry and BPHE degree courses. In Arts courses there was negligible difference between metro and rural students in performance in first year at UWA across the entire TES range. The pattern of performance in Agriculture courses, however, differed from those in the other courses. There was an overall rural superiority but there was virtually no interaction between School Location and TER: the better rural performance at a given TER remained significant down to the course cutoff. The relevant plots of WAM versus TES are presented below.

Using the results of regression analyses it can be shown that at the course TES cutoff of 300 (a TER of 79) the predicted WAM of metro Agriculture students is about 51. A WAM of 51 is the predicted performance level of rural students with a TES of 286 (a TER of 75.15). The data suggest, therefore, that the TER cutoff for rural applicants for Agriculture courses could be lowered to 76 and the marginal rural entrant would
still have an expected WAM as high as that of the marginal metro entrant. Further investigations showed that if the TER cutoff for Agriculture courses was lowered from 79 to 76 for rural applicants, the resulting increase in participation by rural students is likely to be small (other things remaining the same, perhaps two additional students).

A reassuring finding for the proposal to lower the course cutoff for rural applicants to Agriculture is that a comparison of rural and metro students with TERs below 91 (TESs below about 350) in the period 1996-1999 shows that rural students pass first year Agriculture at UWA at a markedly higher rate than metro students (76% versus 56%).

Summary

In summary, if the relevance of the proposed interview to tertiary success has not yet been reliably established then this should be done prior to approval of the scheme. The relative weighting of the TER and interview would also need to be justified. If, on the other hand, the relevance of the proposed interview was reliably established, the scope of application of the proposed scheme may need to be expanded on equity grounds to all applicants, and this could be quite time-consuming and expensive. The available data for the last four years provide support for the simple approach of lowering the TER cutoff for rural applicants to Agriculture courses to 76, a level that for rural students appears to be still consistent with acceptable tertiary performance. The available data provided no support for broadening the CountryWay scheme to other faculties.