

# CORRECTED VERSION

## EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

### **Inquiry into geographical differences in the rate in which Victorian students participate in higher education**

Melbourne — 14 April 2008

#### Members

Mr M. Dixon	Mr S. Herbert
Mr N. Elasmarr	Mr G. Howard
Mr P. Hall	Mr N. Kotsiras
Dr A. Harkness	

Chair: Mr G. Howard

Deputy Chair: Mr N. Kotsiras

#### Staff

Executive Officer: Ms K. Ellingford

Research Officers: Ms C. Whiteman and Ms J. Hope

Committee Administrative Officer: Ms N. Tyler

#### Witness

Mr B. Wright, executive officer, Highlands Local Learning and Employment Network.

**The CHAIR** — I am very pleased to now declare this meeting of the Education and Training Committee formally open. The committee is hearing evidence in relation to its inquiry into geographical differences in the rate in which Victorian students participate in higher education. I wish to advise all those who are giving evidence this afternoon that evidence taken by the committee is subject to parliamentary privilege. I trust you understand what that means, Mr Wright. You are free to share as broadly as you wish, knowing that you have parliamentary immunity for things that are said in here.

The committee welcomes Barry Wright, representing the LLEN (Local Learning and Employment Network) groups across the state. We are certainly pleased to have you come along and speak to us and share some of your thoughts. No doubt some of us will have some questions to ask of you following your presentation.

**Mr WRIGHT** — Thanks, Chair. I probably should make it clear that, whilst I am the chair of the local learning employment networks across the state, technically I cannot speak on their behalf because they are individual incorporated entities. However, we do meet on a regular basis and we do look at these sorts of issues as they arise.

Some of the information that I give you will be drawn from my own local experience at the Highlands level. I am the executive officer of the Highlands Local Learning Employment Network. It is based out of Ballarat. It takes in five local government areas — Moorabool, Pyrenees, north end of Golden Plains, city of Ballarat and Hepburn — so I can talk around those issues.

I would hope that each individual LLEN also makes a submission, whether it gets the opportunity face-to-face or whether it does it in written form. I understand that some written submissions have already been received. We encouraged all LLENs to send invitations out to all secondary schools to also look at whether they wanted a collective response through the LLEN or whether they wanted to also send individual responses. I hope you get quite a lot of those from across the state, especially our more remote and rural areas in schools.

I have not got a formal presentation as such, just to say there are issues arising around students and their socioeconomic status. Evidence shows within each region that coming from a low base like that impacts on young people's aspirations and where they would like to head to — if they are coming from a fairly low base, going to university and moving away from their family home and their location in coming to not only major cities, as Ballarat has two universities, one of which is dual sector. It has a lot of migration in and out, but I think at the end of the day the concerns are that a lot of young people from the real remote rural areas, if they do aspire to leave and are successful with their studies, a lot of the time do not return home because there are not the jobs available in those areas to go back home to. We need to think about that.

I think there is a growing issue around the deferrals. That has been increasing over the last three years. Young people, if they are aspiring to leave home to go to higher education, cannot afford to. Therefore they are leaving school, deferring, not taking up their offer and trying to earn enough money so they qualify for the youth allowance.

That could be seen as a disincentive although there is an upside to that. In talking to some employers, they now see that maybe the playing field is levelling off a little bit. A complaint they had that I have been exposed to over the last few years is, 'All the good kids are going to university. We are getting what is left over. Therefore we might not be getting the quality of students that we are looking for to go into our industries'. With that deferment there could be an upside that employers are getting some of the better quality students now.

Whether that is a perception on their behalf or not remains to be seen. Maybe there is an upside that they might be able to employ those young people who might not necessarily have gone to university. They get a chance to employ them. If they are good employers, hopefully they might offer some personal development training and they might even supplement their education fees if those young people do want to take on tertiary studies. There is that issue.

I think there are issues that we have to look at, that there are some young people who do not aspire and have not got a value on education at all. That is a real issue. I think that is tied in the mix in here. Sometimes there is a direct correlation to some of what you would call poverty locations in different areas. There is a direct correlation with that. Not only do they not aspire to look at higher education, they do not value education at all. That is something that is an issue that we need to look at.

I think themes will come through, and it will be around students wanting to leave home and the affordability of living away from home and how they afford their books, all of their equipment that they need for study as well as their living expenses. I think that will be a strong theme that you will find.

The other thing I think needs to be taken into consideration, too, especially in the more rural and remote areas with small schools, as the school population diminishes, is the capacity to offer a broad education for young people out in the rural and remote areas to get them ready to take the next step if they want tertiary education. The smaller the school and the narrower the provision, the harder it will be for those young people to want to take the next step into tertiary education. That has to be thrown into the mix.

I know some of the remote areas are looking innovatively at how they offer VET across a broad range of subjects and tour buses and all that sort of things. I know in the Wimmera that is what they are doing, but some of the young people are on buses three and four hours a day so they can do VET. It is around provision and the broad provision to enable young people to prepare themselves, to be ready if they do want to take the next step into tertiary education.

Another one that was put to me that I will put on the table was from a local independent school in Ballarat — that is, Ballarat Grammar. They raised the issue around the broader provisions. I know that this is by choice if you want to send your children to an independent school, but it still has a cost impact that a lot of rural people are looking at the narrow provision around what their local school has to offer. To give their kids a better opportunity they actually look at sending them to bigger provincial centres like Ballarat and put them into boarding school.

That is an additional cost burden, but the parents seem to be thinking that that is the right way to go to get their kids ready for tertiary education. I throw that in — that is probably in the mix somewhere. Considering the school mentioned it to me, I thought it was well worth raising. It is not only around the affordability of tertiary education, it is around the affordability of, in some cases, secondary education.

I do not think I have a lot more to say. Probably the only other one that I have here is about HECS (higher education contribution scheme). A lot of young people are incurring debts. I think some do not like doing it, but they see that it is a means to an end, I suppose, and that if they want to go down a certain professional path, they have to do the tertiary study. They incur the HECS fee and they are happy — not happy, but they pay it off over a period of time. I think those students and families who come from a fairly low socioeconomic base struggle to find the affordability to go to tertiary education and are not really happy about then incurring a debt that they have to pay off as soon as they start work. That is thrown in the mix but I think that is all around the financial affordability of wanting to take that next step into tertiary education.

**The CHAIR** — Thanks, Barry. You have mentioned lots of issues. Do you have some recommendations for some potential solutions that you would like to put up?

**Mr WRIGHT** — I think around the youth allowance there needs to probably be some criteria. I have not come with a lot of solutions for what the criteria might be, but maybe there needs to be a closer look at the criteria for youth allowance. With HECS, if we could negotiate with our federal colleagues; we might never get back to the 1970s with free education but I think we need to look at how we make it more attractive for young people wanting to take that next step.

At the moment I can speak only for the Highlands region, but 37 per cent of our young people who are leaving school are going to higher education. We have to look at whether that is enough. I would say that all the research says no, because we have skill shortages across the associated professions as well as in the trade areas. It is how we encourage young people to really want to continue on. We have to look at a culture of lifelong learning, and I do not think we have a culture of lifelong learning. There are some cultural issues that we need to look at, and that probably needs to start right back at primary school.

Solutions around those who do not value education is a bigger issue than just an education issue; that is a social issue and I do not know whether that is relevant here. It probably is, and if there are other committees working — I think it needs to be put into the mix, but I am not sure how you could rectify it just through education alone.

**Mr ELASMAR** — When young people finish school they probably decide for any reasons that they do not want to go to university. Are they aware of the alternative pathways into university and the procedure for that?

**Mr WRIGHT** — That is a good question. I think some do and some do not, and I think that is around the individual schools. I think some schools are very good at giving the students all the correct information and really discussing with them the pathways. When it comes to the students filling out their VTAC forms they talk to them and give them some really good advice around their interests and aspirations. There are some schools that probably do not do that too well.

At the end of the day the sufferer in all that, apart from the students, is TAFE, because I do not think TAFE is well enough promoted across a lot of areas. I think there is a chance to improve that. It is a school issue, though, as I say, some schools do it very well and other schools I do not think do it all that well. It is an individual school-by-school thing, but I think that in the main — and I can only talk from what I see in my local area — at times young people could have been advised better around alternative pathways, including TAFE.

**Mr HALL** — Barry, first of all thank you for coming along today. I am delighted with the interest from LLEN groups right across Victoria in this inquiry. I have had some preliminary contact and I know they are very keen to participate. The first thing I want to ask you is: I am well aware of a lot of the information collected by the various LLEN groups — is there a common set of data that each LLEN collects across its region?

**Mr WRIGHT** — Yes and no, Peter. Every LLEN has what it calls an environmental scan. That is really to have a really good snapshot to look at what is happening in their own areas. But for some LLENs it may depend on their strategic plan and priorities what emphasis that takes. But in the main they would have a standard set of data around the number of schools, the number of students, the number of students in the post-compulsory division. They should also have data around the youth cohort unemployed. They would have a reasonable standard set of data, because they need that for local government planning, because they work closely with their shires and local government areas. I would say that in the main, yes, but it depends on how deep and how far you want it to go because, as I say, there are different priorities in different areas.

**Mr HALL** — Is that sort of information publicly published somewhere?

**Mr WRIGHT** — It is public domain information; each LLEN would have it on their web page but it would also be available through the youth transition division at the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, because all that information is fed back into the department. Yes, that would be available.

**Mr HALL** — Some of the issues that you spoke about will invariably be issues that will come through the course of this inquiry. I wonder whether LLENs can specifically help us with one of those — that is, the transition from school to the workplace. Do the LLENs groups do anything like apprenticeship and traineeship numbers, the number of kids from the region who go on and participate in those? Do they also do anything like identifying areas of skill shortages within the regions that you represent?

**Mr WRIGHT** — We do; that is done on a region-by-region basis. I can speak for a number of LLENs, mine included, that we are working heavily and vigorously with the City of Ballarat and our other neighbouring shires around. There is a workforce participation task force group working that the LLENs is a part of. It is not facilitating that, but it is a part of and is feeding information into it. The local government has done a lot of research and gathered information around the skill shortages in the local areas and the LLENs are certainly working hard in that.

Some LLENs — and we are one of those LLENs — also hold a contract through the federal government, through the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations in what is called a local community partnership. If you look at what they call an LCP through Career Advice Australia and a footprint of a LLEN, they are very similar. That gives you added resources to look at those transitional aspects.

In the LCP is what is called a structured workplace learning officer who helps the schools working with industry to look at the work placements around VET study. There are career transition officers who work with all the careers teachers and the MIPS teachers and others within the school area to look at how they might assist and value add to what is happening within the schools, like bringing industry in — going out and talking to industry and asking industry leaders to come to the schools and talk; and organising industry tours for collective schools and individual schools around certain skill shortage areas or areas of interest for students.

There is also another aspect of the LCP called Adopt a School. That is around looking at working with industry and schools on project-based events and really trying to strengthen that close relationship between industry and schools

so that if there are school-based apprenticeship offers, if there are full apprenticeship offers, that transition from school to work is strengthened. There is a lot of work done in that area.

**The CHAIR** — Just on that score, is promoting those programs more extensively one of the ways that we could deal with some of the aspirational issues, the skills shortage issues, and address that more fully?

**Mr WRIGHT** — I think so. I think there is a lot of scope to do that. I think there is some scope to look at equity within the schools, because I think at the moment — this is my personal opinion, I suppose; I cannot say that it might be a LLEN opinion, but my observations are that the VCE is still the Holy Grail, and given that we have got the amount of young people, which is 39 per cent in our Highlands LLEN region, making the transition to higher ed, and yet we have got 61 per cent wanting to do vocational and other types of activities, there is a lot of inequity in schools around the provision of VET.

If there was equity amongst the schools, some equal provision so that instead of VET being an add-on, it was fully integrated into the school curriculums, which happens in some schools, but I would say only a minor number and the majority are still not that way, I think that would also help our transition for a lot of students into more of the traditional trade skills shortage areas.

**Mr HERBERT** — On the issue of costs and the whole training area, there are a number of courses that lend themselves to a student doing a diploma at a TAFE and getting one year off in terms of credit transfer and then finishing off a degree course. So they get a double certificate, but firstly, it is cheaper because the cost of TAFE is a lot cheaper and you can get out of the first year, and secondly, it enables them to stay in the community whilst they do the initial training.

It is a bit longer, but it is often an option. Do you find that happens often in rural Victoria? Is there enough of that? Are there enough universities looking at more flexible ways of doing credit transfers using TAFE facilities for students doing diplomas?

**Mr WRIGHT** — It does happen. I do not think it happens often enough. In Ballarat we have got a career information centre, and a lot of young people come in who have missed — and I am only taking this on anecdotal evidence. Young people have come in who did not realise that there was a pathway through TAFE. So their first and second offers they have missed out on, and they did not put TAFE in their applications because they did not know enough about it, and then they miss out on that. If they are lucky, TAFE might do a half-year enrolment, so they might pick it up halfway through that year, but they have actually lost six months. So I think what you are saying is right, but —

**Mr HERBERT** — Are universities comfortable? Are universities proactively seeking that sort of pathway?

**Mr WRIGHT** — I think the TAFEs are. Whether it is well enough promoted within the schools and to the people that count within the schools — and that is not only the careers teachers and MIPS teachers within the schools; there are a lot of other teachers that have influence in the schools that may not know about those TAFE pathways.

It is a matter of who the student is talking to, has confidence in and is their major contact within the school that gets some of this information. Once again, it is an individual school thing, how well they do their transition and their career planning with their students. As I say, some do it very well; others may not do it so well, and at the end of the day it is then the students that may or do miss out.

**Mr HALL** — Barry, just on that aspirational issue, which I think is an important issue, I am interested in knowing ways in which we can actually measure aspiration. I think you can look at the tertiary application rates, for example, how many of our kids actually apply, therefore demonstrating an aspiration to become whatever. But there is also lower down the level, where kids may not even get to that point, because they have low aspirational levels earlier on, before they get to years 11 and 12.

**Mr WRIGHT** — I think it starts right back at primary school and probably at preschool, and I was talking to Caitlin about that earlier. I think it is a really good move the way early childhood development has become part of the education department, because I think we have to look at it in a holistic way.

Primary schoolteachers will tell you that they can tell by about grade 3 or 4 who will have trouble transitioning and who might be deemed at risk of leaving school early. They can tell as early as grade 3 and 4. So I think we have got to look right back at the very start to see how we can get young people and their families — and it is all around the family, because sometimes you will find that those young students that do not value education have not got role models. It is their parents, and it could even be third and fourth-generational, that have not valued education, and that cycle keeps happening. So we have got to look at how we break that cycle.

There is a lot of good stuff happening. I know there are some programs in Ballarat, and I know there are programs right across the state working with young single mothers. I think people are starting to see the value in that you have got to get those mums and their young babies, as soon as they are born, and nurture and bring the baby and the mother through together so you can start trying to break that cycle. I think it is going to be one of those issues where it starts right back at the primary level, and we have got to work hard at it.

**Mr HALL** — It was suggested to us by one of our earlier submitters to this inquiry that the strongest correlation between participation rate in higher ed was whether parents had had higher education themselves.

**Mr WRIGHT** — Yes, although in saying that — I saw some figures the other day which did not shock me but I was surprised at them and they were the baby boomers. The baby boomer group, only 38 per cent of those have got a tertiary qualification. That is pretty low, so we are coming off a fairly low base.

The baby boomers to a degree are still in that area of influence. If you look at most of the CEOs, hirers and firers, and movers and shakers, not all, but a fairly high percentage would be in that baby boomer group, so for 38 per cent of that group to have a tertiary education qualifications is quite low. There are some parents that have not got tertiary education but are really keen for their children to come through and have it and give them the best opportunity. But a lot of that is around social issues and social inclusion as well.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you, Barry. We look forward to following through on the submissions from the various LLEN groups as well as others.

**Mr WRIGHT** — Thank you.

**Witness withdrew.**

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#### Witnesses

Ms G. Ferrari, executive officer, and

Ms J. Rose, manager, policy and projects, Youth Affairs Council of Victoria; and

Mr T. Ballard.

**The CHAIR** — Welcome to our inquiry regarding regional variations between participation in tertiary and higher education. It is good to have you, Georgie, representing the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria — that is, YACVic as we generally know it. Are you both students?

**Ms ROSE** — No, sorry, I am a YACVic employee as well.

**The CHAIR** — I thought you may have been as the documentation said ‘students’. You will obviously explain yourselves to us in a little more detail as we go along.

**Ms ROSE** — Yes.

**The CHAIR** — I am pleased to hand over to you to provide your input, and then we will be pleased to ask questions of you.

**Ms FERRARI** — Thank you very much for the invitation to attend today. Jen Rose is my manager of policy and projects at Youth Affairs Council of Victoria, and Tom Ballard, who is from Warrnambool city, will speak a little bit later. We have prepared a submission that we will give to you. We thought that if there are any final questions or other areas you would like us to investigate a little bit further, we can go away and do that work and then present the final submission to you in a week or so.

Firstly, I would really to thank and congratulate the committee for initiating this inquiry. It is and has been for some time an area of concern for my organisation. It has been brought to our attention by YACVic members. We are a membership organisation of about 300 members across the state in about 80 per cent of Victoria’s postcodes. Our members are youth workers, youth service organisations, young people’s schools and police — a whole variety of organisations and agencies that work with young people — and young people themselves.

On the local learning and employment networks, it was good to have Barry speaking before. The LLENs are a key partner with us in a project looking at exactly this issue. We have embarked on a study with 14 local learning and employment networks outside metropolitan Melbourne to look at the reasons why young people from outside metropolitan Melbourne appear to be deferring at higher rates than their city counterparts. We felt that the statistics did not give us enough information about what was behind that. Unfortunately this inquiry has come a little bit too early for us to present our findings from that study, but we are going to take a guess, drawing on some research and some other work that has already been done.

Firstly, we would like to make the point that we do think young people from non-metropolitan areas are deferring at a much higher rate than their city counterparts. The On Track survey data for 2006 found that 13.3 per cent of rural students who completed VCE in 2005 deferred, compared to only 6 per cent of students from metropolitan schools. We also note that compared to other states and territories Victoria has a higher rate of deferral than Queensland, with 15.7 per cent in Victoria compared to 10.4 per cent in Queensland. We thought that was interesting, given that Queensland is obviously a much bigger state and that some of the problems that we might surmise are the reasons behind deferral would be exacerbated in a state as big as Queensland and yet we have a higher deferral rate. We have a slightly lower rate of deferral than South Australia at 16.8 per cent.

We think that there are a number of reasons for higher deferral rates for rural and regional young people and we think a lot of them relate to economic reasons, some of which Barry touched on before. This is a quote from Rob Wallis, the pro-vice-chancellor of Deakin University, who presented to the Rural and Regional Services and Development Committee at its 2006 inquiry into retaining young people in rural towns, which you will probably be familiar with. He said:

... deferment rates for students in south-west Victoria are double those of Melbourne students. The reason is almost always financial ... importantly our data shows only about half these students re-enrol.

We have footnoted that reference so that you can have a further look at that.

We think that the independent youth allowance has a large impact on young people’s deferral rates. That was also picked up and discussed in the inquiry into retaining young people in rural and regional towns. We think that often in order to meet the needs of young people attending for tertiary study — that is, the costs that they need to meet in terms of moving from towns and living independently from family — they are forced to defer to save enough money. With the way that the youth allowance system is set up, in order to prove your eligibility for an independent living allowance you have to earn \$18 525 in the first 18 months after leaving high school. We think that that then

has an impact for young people. They go away and find a job to earn that money so that they can access that allowance later, but then they get hooked into earning and they do not re-enrol. They progress in those jobs and that has an impact.

Research released last year by Naomi Godden, who was working with the Centre for Rural Social Research and Monash University's department of social work, explored in detail the relationship between youth allowance eligibility and young people's access to tertiary education. The report, which is entitled *Regional Young People and Youth Allowance — Access to Tertiary Education*, took a qualitative approach, gathering information predominantly via interviews and focus groups in regional areas across Australia. The evidence revealed — I am quoting from the report — that:

The youth allowance system does not address the specific needs of regional Australians. The overwhelmingly negative and angry attitude towards youth allowance demonstrates that regional families feel unsupported and ignored, and are financially struggling. Participants —

in the survey —

express their concern that tertiary education is inaccessible for low and middle-income families from regional Australia. All participants believe that the system should support regional young people to participate in tertiary education.

We have made a recommendation around that, which I will get to later.

I want to touch just a little bit on the high costs of living away from home and the disadvantage experienced by rural students and families. It obviously relates to the independent living allowance, but there are other issues as well. Given the pressure on rural young people to defer in order to afford access to higher education, the current Centrelink payment structure does not adequately recognise the relative disadvantage experienced by young people in rural areas in accessing higher education. Typically, young people in rural areas have to move in order to access their higher education opportunities, placing inescapable financial burden on families and the young people themselves. The inquiry into retaining young people in rural towns and communities found that both scholarship initiatives funded by the commonwealth government and rent assistance schemes from Centrelink, which are available to some rural families from low socioeconomic backgrounds, do not provide enough assistance to ensure equality of opportunity to access education. The inquiry found — and now I am quoting from the report — that:

Neither approach adequately addresses the following important issue: regardless of income or location any rural family with a student who is required to move away from home for study will incur accommodation and relocation costs. Extra costs for participation in higher education are not incurred by metropolitan families where the student is able to remain at home. The committee considers this to be a relative disadvantage experienced by rural families.

To this end, the inquiry made recommendation 34, which is:

That the state government urge the commonwealth to introduce a variant of the youth allowance payment which provides the necessary funding to overcome the higher cost of university study for rural young people.

We do not know that that recommendation has gone anywhere and would very much like to urge the Victorian government to look at that again. Perhaps now, with the changes at the federal level, we may get more traction on that and be able to progress it.

When we were putting this submission together we put out a call to our members to provide us with some case studies. We received a case study from which I will read a little bit because I think it is particularly telling. It is from a young woman called Lauren, who wrote in to us with her story, and I quote directly from it:

I lived in Echuca throughout my schooling and have moved to Melbourne to study three and a half years ago now. Almost every semester I consider deferring my studies, and the issues are always monetary related. I work ridiculous hours in order to ... stay in Melbourne, as I know many of my friends from Echuca do also, and I know that my studies (and a lot of my friends') suffer due to our long working hours. I believe Victorian Parliament should be looking at ways to ease the financial stress placed on the young adults that choose to relocate for education. A possible option could be further government funding given to the universities for the units to give to rural students. Another possible option ... would be to force universities to have greater flexibility in regards to off-campus/distance learning. Many courses are not offered by distance education, specifically by the Group of Eight universities.

I think this goes a little bit to the aspirational stuff that was talked about earlier, so I will just read this bit as well.

I have also noticed a big difference in the way that rural students are prepared for tertiary education, as compared to those schooled somewhere in Melbourne ...

She says:

... this may be a generalisation, but it's what I have observed. Country students are often simply encouraged to get some form of tertiary education, regardless of what it may be. I was encouraged to go to university, but my educators did not seem to have much of a suggestion as to what I should do. If a rural student simply gets into university this is seen as an achievement, regardless of the course they have gotten into — three years later with an arts degree under their belt, they still have no idea what to do with themselves. I compare this with a lot of my Melbourne friends who were encouraged to do career-oriented courses to suit their abilities, i.e. commerce, accounting, law, medicine. They enter universities knowing that they are studying to work for Ernst and Young, or the Royal Children's Hospital. I suggest that the Victorian government look into regulating the careers advisers in schools, encouraging individuals in the role to question why students wish to study what they are looking at and what they want to get from it. It is not good enough for schools to encourage going to uni simply for the sake of going to uni when some may be better placed in the workforce, or getting traineeships.

I think Lauren picks up on a few of those aspirational issues quite well.

The other issue I just want to touch on quickly before handing over to Tom, and Jen may also want to add some points, is the impact of the drought on this issue. Last year we conducted a forum where we took a group of young people from the city to Boort to interact with a group of young people from that area to talk about the impact of the drought. We are just finalising that report now. It is going to come out soon. It is called, 'Talking about the big dry: young people and the impact of drought'. But from that work we have done and from other research we have drawn on we know the drought is having a big impact. A couple of researchers called Alston and Kent have suggested that young people are working long hours on farms assisting with labour tasks and are missing out on school as a result of the increased responsibility on farms. They point to the employment pressure on young people living in rural and regional towns, noting that:

Young people in towns are working part-time jobs, earning money that they report they need for their own education. Most rural young people encountered in this study are working long hours outside school either in paid work or farm work.

**Ms ROSE** — Another thing that came through to us in talking with young people in this forum was the aspirational stuff and the impact of the drought there. Young people were expressing quite serious feelings of guilt about taking on tertiary education. They are already quite aware of pressures on family and feeling as though their taking up this opportunity was only making that more strained. They were often quite worried about their father's mental health in particular. Where there are already perhaps some issues around aspirational ways of imagining your future, this was again impacted on by drought.

**Ms FERRARI** — I think that is summed up nicely by this one quote from a young person at the Big Dry forum who said:

I still have a positive outlook on the future and going to university, however, I will be conscious of the cost when applying for colleges.

There is that added level of responsibility or burden.

In summing up just a few of our recommendations before I hand over to Tom, we recommend that the inquiry considers recommendations previously made by the former Rural and Regional Services and Development Committee because we think that quite a few of those recommendations may shed light on this inquiry. We are concerned that some of those or many of those recommendations have not been addressed or picked up by the state government. Of particular relevance we think is recommendation 34:

That the state government urge the commonwealth to introduce a variant of the youth allowance payment which provides the necessary funding to overcome the higher cost of university study for rural young people.

We also recommend that this inquiry consider the range of alternative support options such as an investment in mentoring opportunities or improved supports for students in rural and regional areas of Victoria to prepare for higher education to better assist them to move to urban areas for the purposes of study.

What I did not touch on is a discussion around the impact of the skills shortage on this issue. I am sure others have talked about it, but we are concerned that because there are specific industry shortages in rural and regional areas, young people may be getting drawn into those areas and not taking up their tertiary offers later. I know a couple of the LLENs have pointed this issue out as well. Our third recommendation is that you look at ways of strengthening the capacity of those employers to assist and encourage young people to access higher education. They might need them for a while in their industry to fill some gaps, but there could be some incentive schemes to get those young

people to take up their tertiary offers later. Employers could contribute to the cost, or there could be some sort of time-off-for-study system established.

Finally, we recommend that there be improvements made to young people's access to transport in rural and regional areas. That is another part that we have not touched on because of time, but our report will pick up on that. Barry noted that not all the universities are in Melbourne; there are regional towns in Victoria that have universities, but young people in more remote or rural parts of Victoria will have trouble even accessing those. VCOSS — the Victorian Council of Social Service — will be putting in a written submission to this inquiry, and I know it will be talking more about the impact of transport. We endorse its recommendations around that, specifically things like giving tertiary students access to school bus services which could greatly assist young people getting to towns like Bendigo and Ballarat for tertiary study. On that note, I will hand over to Tom.

**Mr BALLARD** — Good afternoon. First of all I would just like to thank the Parliament very much for conducting this inquiry into an issue that has played a big part in my life over the past 12 months. I hope that from this inquiry parliamentarians will gain a deeper understanding of the realities of life for young people in rural areas when it comes to tertiary education. They may be able to make some changes to improve the situation.

My name is Tom. I am 18 years old and for the past 12 years I have lived in Warrnambool in regional south-west Victoria. Last year I completed my year 12 VCE at Brauer College in Warrnambool, which is a very well-funded government school with some excellent facilities. The tertiary education opportunities in Warrnambool are somewhat limited. There is a Deakin University campus, which offers very specific courses, and a TAFE college, although I understand this is considerably more than many other regional locations have. My older brother, Gavin, who is 21 years old and is currently in his fourth year studying a double degree of IT-engineering and law at Melbourne University, and he is living on campus at St Hilda's College.

Since I was 9 or 10 years old I have wanted passionately to pursue drama and the performing arts as a professional career. I feel very strongly about theatre, film, television, radio and stand-up comedy. I believe I am talented in this area, and I have a burning desire to excel. For a long time it has been my dream to study at a respected and challenging institution such as the Victorian College of the Arts here in Melbourne or at the National Institute of Dramatic Art in Sydney once I completed secondary school. As there are no such institutions and no performing arts courses offered within 250 kilometres of my home town of Warrnambool this ambition, if pursued, would require me to move away from home.

Entry into these institutions does not require an ENTER score of any kind; it is purely based on audition. While I studied theatre studies in drama as part of my VCE, essentially my results at the end of year 12 had no bearing on my chances of gaining entry into the VCA or NIDA. However, I set myself certain goals and strived to do my best in my final year at school because I enjoyed my subject areas and because I did not want to let myself down.

Around about the same time as my year 12 exams in November of last year I auditioned for both NIDA and the VCA. I was not called back following my NIDA audition, but I did make it to the very last round of auditions for the VCA. I was told I would have to wait until the second round of university offers came out in mid-January before I knew whether or not I had any chance of being accepted into the acting course. In the meantime I was required to put down my preferences for university courses through the VTAC system. To be honest, I found myself failing to be interested in those preferences apart from my first preference — acting, at the VCA. I honestly felt that if I was not accepted into this course I would just do as many of my other friends were planning to do — defer any course I got into, take a bit of a break and try to make some money to qualify for youth allowance to support me when I eventually did go to university, perhaps in 2009. To many of my peers and myself this really did seem the best available option, all things considered.

It is perhaps here that I can provide the most crucial insight into this issue for the inquiry — that is, describing what it means for young people in regional areas to go to university in the city. It is not simply a matter of choosing a course and then buying the stationery. Going to university means moving away from family and friends, living in completely different surroundings, building up a whole new network of friends, teachers and mentors, and getting accustomed to a very different way of living and studying. Furthermore, as we have heard, going to university imposes considerable financial burdens both on the students from country areas and their families. The fees for attending university alone are prohibitively high for some families, let alone coupled with the cost of accommodation. It is because of this that so many students view deferral and working to gain independence and to receive youth allowance as such a sensible course of action.

Regional students expect to live on a shoestring budget if they are going to university, as the idea of getting used to living on campus, getting used to studying at university, knowing how to get around the city, battling homesickness and juggling a part-time job in the metropolis, which is hard enough to get in the first place, is simply unrealistic. For me, going to university this year would mean seriously cutting myself off from my friends — the overwhelming majority of whom have deferred and remained in the Warrnambool area — leaving home, my parents having to travel to Melbourne to visit either of their sons, and creating a substantial debt for myself that would mount up over the following three years.

Faced with challenges such as these, it is not surprising that, for regional kids the idea of pursuing education is often disregarded or eventually forgotten. My mum is a careers teacher at Terang College, a small rural government school where the student population is largely from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. She had serious reservations about me considering deferral, as she has too often seen students deferring a university course only to never take it up — finding the return to study and the disruption of moving away too inconvenient for them after securing a local full-time job. Indeed I think it is very easy for other students in my position to simply see the whole experience of tertiary education away from home as too much effort, especially after the considerable intellectual and emotional work-out that is the completion of year 12. The familiarity and the safety in one's home town, as well as the opportunities and connections that students have — and know for certain that they have — can be far more appealing in comparison to the mystery and the complications of moving away to go to university.

On 19 December last year I received my VCE results. I gained an ENTER score of 99.0, a score that I was proud of and that I felt reflected my hard work. In January I received a first-round offer to study law at Monash University. Knowing that I could still be accepted into the VCA in the second round and feeling the way I did about taking up the law course when I was not 100 per cent passionate about it, I decided to defer this offer. A few weeks later I was offered a full-fee-paying course at the VCA, not a HECS place. As this was simply too expensive, I was not able to take it up.

Even deferring poses some particular problems for students living in rural areas. While in the city students who have deferred their university course might be able to easily keep in contact with their chosen university or pursue relative work experience in the area of their course, such opportunities are greatly limited in the country. If I wish to gain greater experience in a wide range of performances and with a wide range of theatre companies, for example, I am practically compelled to move to and live in Melbourne while I do so.

The differences in opportunities between students from the city and students from the country are perhaps best illustrated through the example of two friends of mine. One of my friends lives in North Fitzroy. He attended University High and is now studying arts at Melbourne University. He tells me he is not really sure what he wants to do and he is not really enjoying the course at all, but he plans to continue the course for the rest of the year at least, figuring he can pretty much put up with it.

Another friend of mine, who lives just around the corner from me in Warrnambool, moved to Melbourne to study at La Trobe University this year. He found that he was not enjoying the course and the whole experience was not really for him. Putting up with it for the rest of the year was not really an option for him. He missed his family and friends, and he would have felt guilty about continuing to cost his family a significant amount of money when he was not really enjoying what he was doing. He has now deferred the rest of his course and moved back home.

I believe that the disadvantages faced by students from regional Victoria greatly impact upon their desire and their ability to attend tertiary education in the city. We need to address this imbalance, as it is in regional areas — as I am sure you are aware — that we are in great need of university graduates. It is in the country that we have a dire shortage of nurses and doctors, and of lawyers and teachers. We need to encourage and excite all young Australians about the possibility of gaining a tertiary education. This option is certainly not — and most likely never will be — free, as it was for my parents' generation, but I know that it can be made far more accessible for those from regional and rural areas through the introduction of more scholarships, greater careers advice programs, incentives for universities to take country students, and, more generally, government policy that appreciates the challenges faced by those outside the state's capital. I think we can make serious progress in this area and revitalise the education system in Victoria. Thank you very much for your time, and I wish you all the very best for the remainder of the inquiry.

**The CHAIR** — In terms of where you are at, Tom, what are your aspirations for next year? What do you think it is likely you will do next year?

**Mr BALLARD** — At the end of this year I would like to re-audition for VCA and NIDA, and if I do not gain entry to those institutions again, I will take up the law course at Monash University.

**The CHAIR** — You did not consider drama at any of the other universities that offer drama? I do not know whether Deakin in Geelong does — certainly Ballarat does — and I presume there are other sites in Melbourne that offer it. It is just VCA or NIDA?

**Mr BALLARD** — There was also the Western Australia Academy of Performing Arts, which I should have considered and have heard a lot about. Monash offers a performing arts course and, yes, there is the University of Ballarat Arts Academy course as well. Personally I felt that if I was to commit three years of my life to a performing arts course I would really hope for that to take place at an institution in high regard, international regard, such as the VCA or NIDA. I have been involved in the VCA through a couple of short-course programs and really enjoyed that, so that was my ultimate ambition.

**The CHAIR** — Just before I hand over to other members of the panel, I grew up in Geelong and I could not wait to get away from home to go on to university. I am surprised that in what you are saying there seems to be so much apprehension among you and your friends in going away from Warrnambool to university. Is that the standard feeling, or is that just among some of your friends?

**Mr BALLARD** — Yes, there is a similar feeling in Warrnambool — a great place to grow up, but getting away from it would be great once you have reached a certain age. I think a lot of people would be excited about going to university — and I think they are — but with the reality of going to university comes a lot of complications and a lot of things to consider. In the face of all of those challenges, for a lot of my peers — at least temporarily — the best option is to stay where they are and consider university at a later date.

**The CHAIR** — The other issue is whether deferral is a bad thing. That is clearly something we would like to do more research on. There are benefits to deferral, in maybe getting some more world experience, doing some other things and having a break from your education and coming back refreshed to go on to university. I am wondering what the feel is about the pros and cons of deferral, or whether there is some research that you are aware of in the area.

**Ms FERRARI** — Certainly in the study we are doing with the 14 LLENs we are going to ask the questions: Why did you defer? Was it because you wanted to get a bit more life experience, or because you did not get the course you wanted? What were your reasons? We are definitely going to look at the rates at which young people take up their offers in the following year, and if they do not take them up, their reasons for not taking them up. We will know a little bit more around that. I do not necessarily think deferral in itself is such a bad thing; it is what happens afterwards — the reasons why, and then what happens afterwards.

**Mr HERBERT** — On the issue of deferral, I have a son in this position. I know it works against some city kids, too, who wish to travel interstate for a course or often to a regional campus. Sometimes some urban kids want to go out to the country for a while, too, and the same thing really applies. The question is: what would be a better system in terms of generally finding out that a young person is living independently, vis-a-vis not having this ridiculous 18 months, \$18 000 rule?

**Ms ROSE** — Probably, and we heard Barry suggest this as well. The eligibility criteria and its suitability to rural families as opposed to families per se probably can be looked at.

**Mr HERBERT** — Could it be a certain distance, a travel time? In the Parliament we get a travel allowance if we live more than 26 kilometre out or if we live further out.

**Ms ROSE** — I know that as a response to the drought some changes were made whereby if you were a farmer or a local small business that had received the exceptional circumstances assistance through Centrelink then your children could receive the independent youth allowance without your assets being tested.

**Mr HERBERT** — That is right, but that does not get over the distance component.

**Ms ROSE** — No, but it might go some way. One of the things that the Godden piece of research was saying was that middle-income families simply cannot meet the cost of having to relocate their child. You have to look at the rental market now as well. If you are a family trying to pay rent for your kid in the inner city, if they are

not going to necessarily be in halls of residence or something, those costs are increasingly steep. It is more that middle band, not just the low socioeconomic band, who do not qualify for an independent youth allowance because they are asset tested and really cannot afford it. They really struggle to afford to support their child financially to travel the distance and live in Melbourne.

It is about recognising that this is not just about the geographic distance stuff. It is, but it is also about middle-income families struggling to meet the resettlement costs of supporting a child, and that the one-size-fits-all Centrelink approach does not work. That would be our position.

**Mr BALLARD** — On that point I would just like to put it into perspective. I finished my last exam in November of last year, and if I make \$18 000 I am not eligible for the youth allowance until May of 2009.

**Mr HERBERT** — So it starts when you finish your last exam. I was wondering about that. Does it start at the formal end of the school year? No, it starts when you actually finish your last exam.

**Mr BALLARD** — On the day of the last exam, yes. I would argue that those first couple of months of university is perhaps when you need the support the most.

**Mr HERBERT** — What happens if you do not go back in 18 months? What happens if you go back after two years and you only get your \$18 000 in the last 18 months? Does that mean you are not eligible?

**Ms ROSE** — I don't know. You have to make the \$18 000 in the first 18 months after leaving school.

**Mr HERBERT** — If you do not do that and you are out for another six months and you work pretty hard then — —

**Ms ROSE** — No — tough.

**Mr HERBERT** — It is tough; you can never get youth allowance — never.

**Ms ROSE** — No.

**Mr HERBERT** — Wow! That is kind of bizarre, isn't it?

**Ms ROSE** — The system does need some reform.

**Mr HALL** — Firstly, thank you all for your contribution. I thought it was well-researched and has been very helpful, particularly some of that further deferral work which you are doing with the LLENs; that will be great. Thank you, Tom, for your instructive personal account. Let me tell you that more years ago than I care to remember I was also a country student studying at a country secondary college. I got a university place but my mum and dad could not afford to send me there so I had to accept something other than my first preference and take a studentship which bonded me to become a teacher at that point of time. Some things really do not change, and I give you that example because it is an illustration that we do have some empathy and understanding of the situation you find yourself in. Good luck with whatever you do.

My question to Georgie and Jen is that this is about geographical differences, it is not just the differences between country and city. Therefore, through your council work, I wondered whether you are also detecting some differences in terms of participation rates and access to tertiary education opportunities between regional parts of Melbourne as well.

**Ms FERRARI** — We have focused mainly on the rural and metropolitan difference because obviously that is where the study we are embarking on with the LLENs is taking us. But we have also been pointed in the direction of the interface issues in outer suburban Melbourne. We could certainly look into that if you would like to see if there are some issues around it. We have not done a lot of work in that area, but you will be aware of the work of the nine interface councils — they have been quite vocal. We can talk with them about some issues they may see in that area and get back to you.

**Mr HALL** — Sure, and they will probably come to us too, but if you come across anything particularly helpful in respect of that as well — I think the country-metro divide is going to be fairly well clear and will be put forward by a lot of people. You will do it too with your deferral study, and that is great. We may need some more

work done, and if you are doing it, it would be helpful if you looked at the city difference as well as the country-city difference.

**Ms ROSE** — We already have — in terms of some of the things you know will influence whether young people receive and take up tertiary offers — done some work around young people's access to services in outer suburban areas. In that we did a literature review of research around a whole lot of things to do with young people's experiences. The literature shows that young people in those outer urban areas — not in all of them but in several of them — have lower secondary school retention rates and lower completion rates. There is no doubt that would have an impact on access to higher education.

The other thing is that we had reported to us through our policy advisory group recently that there are also some aspirational issues specifically in those locations. That might not just be about a family history of access to education, it can also be with newly arrived communities and trying to help some of those young people understand that this is an option for them that their parents might not have had. Yes, we have certainly done some work around some of those other factors that come into play.

**Mr HALL** — Thank you.

**Ms FERRARI** — I will make a note to incorporate some of that.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you very much for your contribution. We are aware of the time. I am sure with all of our visitors there are lots of other things we could go into but it certainly was an outstanding presentation, and we appreciated all aspects of it. Thank you very much, and good luck, Tom, with VCA or NIDA or whatever happens at the end of the year. I trust you will be happy whatever way it ends up.

**Mr BALLARD** — Thank you very much.

**Ms FERRARI** — Thank you very much for your time.

**Witnesses withdrew.**



# CORRECTED VERSION

## EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

### **Inquiry into geographical differences in the rate in which Victorian students participate in higher education**

Melbourne — 14 April 2008

#### Members

Mr M. Dixon

Mr N. Elasmarr

Mr P. Hall

Dr A. Harkness

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Committee Administrative Officer: Ms N. Tyler

#### Witness

Ms S. Cole, state president, Victoria, National Union of Students.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you, Sarah, for coming in, as representative of the National Union of Students (NUS). As you are aware, this inquiry relates to regional variations in regard to participation in higher education. We are certainly pleased to hear what you say. I do not know if you heard and understand that what is said in this inquiry in this room is subject to parliamentary privilege, so you are free to speak fairly widely. We are certainly keen to hear what you have got to say and will ask questions of you after a period of time.

**Ms COLE** — Thanks very much for having me. I just wanted to apologise first of all in that Angus McFarland, who is the NUS national president, wanted to come along to this. He is very interested in the work the committee is doing but he is actually based in Sydney and found it was going to be very difficult to get down to Victoria at this time.

I am the president of the state branch of NUS in Victoria and I also, I guess, speak from my experience as a La Trobe University student. I am at the Bundoora campus but La Trobe, as you would know, also has campuses at Mildura, Wodonga, Shepparton and Bendigo. First of all NUS is basically the peak body that student representative organisations on campuses across Australia affiliate to. It coordinates campaigns around issues but in a directly responsive way — issues that students are bringing up on campuses — and works with the NTU, Universities Australia, the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA) and various other bodies to voice students' concerns within the education sector. Also in my role as state branch president I travel to a lot of campuses, and I have met students from a range of different campuses, so I guess I have that anecdotal evidence informing me as well.

I am going to concentrate particularly on the economic factors that affect students' ability to get an education and particularly how they affect students from rural areas, who have to move to access education or have to travel long distances to get to university. I will also talk a little bit from my experience at La Trobe about the differences between the quality of education and the support services available to students at a big city campus and a smaller regional campus; and also the effect that the recent voluntary student unionism legislation has had on support services at university campuses. It sounds like you heard a bit about that before.

The NUS has been campaigning since long before I was a student for improvement to student income support. I have been looking through some of the submissions that have been put forward to this review and a number of them identified student income support as a factor. The last people were talking about Centrelink and some of the problems with that.

I will just go through some facts from a recent survey undertaken by Universities Australia that reported in 2006. It reported that one in eight students goes without food regularly because they cannot afford it. It is interesting to note that that figure at La Trobe is greater; it is more like one in four students go without food. Two in five students reported that their study was adversely affected by the number of hours they had to work to support themselves. One in three students miss classes because they have to attend paid employment. It showed that the rate of students taking out personal loans has increased since 2000. It also showed that the rate of students being rejected in their applications for Centrelink benefits had risen quite sharply.

Also of interest was the report it had on why students defer from study after they have accepted a university place in year 12. It said that 27 per cent of students who took a gap year said that the primary reason was to save to go to university or to work to achieve independent status to qualify for a youth allowance. Evidence from other reports, like the On Track survey, showed that that was a higher figure amongst students from rural areas.

Another thing the survey showed was that two-thirds of part-time students surveyed indicated that they would like to study full time but their finances did not permit it. Many of them were working nearly full-time hours while doing part-time study. You can see from those facts that financial support and being able to support yourself through university is really affecting students' choices in how they study and the rate at which they take up higher education. Obviously these problems particularly hurt students who have to move from rural areas to Melbourne into an extremely tight rental market and support themselves rather than be able to live at home.

Warwick Jones from the Australian Scholarships Group said in relation to a study it put out just recently that for a three-year journalism course at university, a student living at home could expect to pay around \$45 000 over the course of that three-year course but a student who is living away from home, particularly of course those students from the country, would have to pay something like \$77 000 for the same three-year course. That is taking into account all their living expenses while they are studying.

This was supported, I noticed, by the anecdotal evidence in the submission to this review from the Barwon South-Western Region Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. This was anecdotal evidence from a conference of a number of school career teachers in their area. They said that a medium-sized P–12 school disclosed deferral rates of over 20 per cent while a smaller P–12 on the opposite side of Warrnambool said deferral rates were around 50 per cent.

The three large Warrnambool schools also expressed concern over large and growing numbers of deferrals. One had a deferral rate of 48 per cent of those offered university places, while the other large state school had a rate of 40 per cent. The medium-sized Catholic college, while not disclosing actual deferral rates, did say these were an issue, and a growing one. All five schools said that the cost of accommodation in Melbourne was the main issue in deferrals.

So the cost of living away from home is obviously a great factor for rural students. Anecdotally, I have a couple of friends who have moved from the country to study at university, and particularly in that first year of study they found it really very difficult to cope with laying out bond to secure a rental property, even finding a place to rent in the first place.

At the moment the rental market is so tight that there are massive queues just to look at what is quite a shoddy student house. So it is very difficult to get in. I noticed in the Melbourne Uni. submission they are reporting that all their student accommodation is full for the year by the end of January. That is I think a huge factor for people moving from the country.

I know a couple of people who have actually found it too hard and have had to drop out of university — both of them midway through first year — because they had moved from a country town and been in a situation where they have had to support themselves entirely in Melbourne. One of them qualified for youth allowance and one of them did not, but both, after trying a number of different combinations of work and study and part-time work, found that it was just too hard and gave up on getting a university education. One of them says that they hope later on in life to come back and study but the other one is looking into other options and just full-time work; they do not have any plans to go back because it was just too hard. They both said if there were changes to student income support, they would reassess their option to not study.

The report by Universities Australia, from which I just listed a number of the statistics, has come out quite strongly recommending reforms to student income support. Professor Robson from Universities Australia says in a media release:

If Australia is truly intent on ensuring optimal educational outcomes for Australian university students, it must provide those students with an adequate economic and living platform allowing them to focus on educational achievement.

Another factor that I did not mention in terms of the geographical effect on the expenses students face is people having to drive to university. At the campus I attend, the Bundoora campus of La Trobe University, a lot of students have to drive to university so they have to maintain a car and deal with high petrol costs because the public transport options in the areas they are living in are such that a 20 minute or half-hour drive to university is a 1½-hour or 2-hour trip on public transport, which they cannot fit into quite a tight schedule of work and study. And of course petrol prices are going up and up, and also car parking fees at universities are on the rise.

Monash and La Trobe have both doubled their parking fees over the last couple of years, and at La Trobe in the first couple of months of the year you find that between 9 o'clock and 10 o'clock in the morning it is actually impossible to find a spot even if you have a parking permit, so a large number of students are struggling with that.

In terms of student income support, NUS has held a number of forums over the past couple of years at different campuses and has tried to talk to students who are on income support and students who have failed to qualify for it and others about how they think student income support could be improved. A number of different things came up.

Obviously the main thing people brought up was the fact that even if you qualify for the full rate of it, it is so low that you just have to work quite a number of hours on top of that. That led to another point that people brought up, which was the amount that you can actually earn before your Centrelink payments get cut back, which is quite low and has not been indexed in quite a long time. It is very low. In the average student hospitality job you cannot work more than 8 hours a week before your income support gets cut off. Obviously it is very hard to find a job that will give you that small amount of shifts so that is a very difficult trap that people find themselves in. A lot of people

said, 'I do not mind if the youth allowance does not improve; but if I could earn a bit more on top of that, then that would help'.

In terms of how people qualify for the youth allowance, the age of independence is a key thing that needs to be looked at. Universities Australia has also said the age of independence needs to be lowered. A huge number of students are actually taking a year off just to earn the amount of money that you have to earn to qualify for independent status because unless you do that, Centrelink assesses you on your parents' income until you are 25. That does not reflect the reality of the way a lot of students are living or would like to see themselves, as independent and supporting themselves. That is an important factor.

Beyond income support the other thing that I wanted to talk about is the differences between the quality of education at the different La Trobe campuses that I have observed as a La Trobe student. I remember the first time I went into one of my bigger sociology classes in first year. I came in and sat down in this huge lecture theatre. The lecturer was up the front and then up on the screen there were four different screens, and there were small classrooms or lecture theatres that you could see on these screens.

They were students in Albury-Wodonga, Mildura, Shepparton and Bendigo who were watching this lecture videostreamed from La Trobe. Throughout a course of, say, 10 lectures there was one lecture where I came in and I watched the lecture on one of those screens. The lecturer was based in Bundoora for the rest of them. A lot of people studying at the regional La Trobe campuses are paying the same amount as I am for a degree but hardly ever see a lecturer — they watch these videostreams. In a lot of cases they watch a DVD that has been pre-recorded. They do not even have a tutor there to put the DVD on. One of the students has to collect it and put it on. It just seems outrageous to me that they are paying the same amount for their degree as me.

It means that there is a lot less support there for them if they need to access a lecturer, if they have questions or they are having problems completing their assignments. I think that would have an impact on the ease that students have in completing their degree and sticking at it.

Finally, I just wanted to briefly comment on the impact that voluntary student unionism has on support services that really help students who have had to move away from home. I know a couple of students who are at university and who have moved to Melbourne from rural areas. One of them, a close friend, in first year was doing quite well academically at the start of the year but found it incredibly hard to make friends because you do not make friends in lectures and tutorials. It is difficult.

You need other forums to make friends and she was just feeling very lonely and isolated, which is a problem that a lot rural students report on moving into the big city. Eventually, on the verge of dropping out she saw some posters and got involved in one of the clubs on campus and has made a whole network of friends. She got through her degree and then did a second degree, is now working in Melbourne and is still connected to those networks of friends that she made through that club.

A lot of the clubs and societies programs, various sporting activities and events that previously were funded through general service fees collected from students, which have been abolished under the voluntary student unionism legislation, are really under threat. I know sporting activities have been cut back on a lot of campuses around Victoria. They have a very real effect on retention rates. The ability of students to link into networks and have those friendship networks there at university is really crucial in getting by and getting through their degrees. I think that is definitely something worth keeping in mind. And that is about it.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you, Sarah.

**Mr HALL** — Sarah, perhaps I will start with a couple of quick ones. Do you know what percentage of university students gain employment to support their studies?

**Ms COLE** — I do not have a figure offhand. I know it is the majority but if you look at the Universities Australia report, it certainly has a figure for that.

**Mr HALL** — Do you know if that figure is distorted in any respect with the large number of overseas full fee-paying students?

**Ms COLE** — I do not think so because I know the Universities Australia report separated out those different groups of students, and it showed that there is a majority of Australian domestic students who were working as well as studying.

**Mr HALL** — The other thing I was going to ask you about in terms of student income support is: how invaluable would a living-away-from-home allowance be?

**Ms COLE** — I think that would be very important. There is currently a small amount of rent assistance offered but it is far from enough to provide any real assistance, but I think it is very important that student income support take into account that huge difference in cost for people who have to live away from home.

**Mr HALL** — Because there are many even probably in the outer metro area who would choose, if they had some living-away-from-home allowance support, to actually live on or close to campus, wouldn't they? It is a significant journey time for them each day from an outer suburb to cross sometimes to the other side of the city.

**Ms COLE** — I know a couple of people who are living over closer to the Monash University area but the course they have got into or the course that they wanted to do was not offered by Monash but it is at La Trobe. They have these massive travel times to get across the city to study but they are living at home because they just cannot afford to live away from home.

**The CHAIR** — Sarah, you were talking about students who come from the country who then might be isolated, I presume, because they are living in separate units or flats or something, just in small groups or something. In my experience, coming from the country to university — if you were able to get into a university college or something like that, then that overcame that issue of isolation that can be experienced. But I presume there is obviously a cost issue associated with the difference between living in a college, but are there other opportunities that you are aware of that are being developed for more group accommodation for students as opposed to one or two students living in a unit?

**Ms COLE** — Not that I am specifically aware of, although I heard that Richard Wynne was looking into some options for integrating public housing initiatives with student housing around the Melbourne uni area, but I do not know much about that. But I know that La Trobe has a number of colleges, which are usually booked out, and it is a substantially more expensive option than living in a shared house. They also have a different level student accommodation that is not so much a college in that there are a lot less services or support there; it is more sort of student units that are a bit more of a cost. Often it is still a lot cheaper to get yourself into a sort of share house or unit.

**Mr ELASMAR** — Students leave university before they complete their studies, do you know the reason for that?

**Ms COLE** — I guess there are a number of different reasons. Probably a large number of students are leaving, for a large part, because of the strain of supporting themselves financially. And that comes into a broader thing of the strain of university in general, maintaining academic standards and things like that, but a large part of that is supporting themselves and the amount of time they have to spend at work and balancing that with study and things like that. I think that is a large factor. I do not have statistics to back that up.

**Mr HERBERT** — Sarah, thank you for your presentation. I was just interested when you were talking about the costs et cetera and Peter's point about rent assistance — I wonder whether there has been any analysis done about the economics of establishing more rural campuses vis-a-vis a substantial increase in rent assistance for the high costs or living away from home allowances. Are you aware of any studies that have been done into that sort of — because really when you look at it, they are the options, are they not? They are to provide more rural campuses for universities, and you could say economic incentives, I guess, for universities to do that or have a much greater capacity to financially support people living away from their country towns. Do you know of any?

**Ms COLE** — I do not know of any that specific. I know that La Trobe — I think it was not last year but the year before — reviewed its provision of regional education, but that was particularly looking at the cost. If you look at the cost per student at regional campuses, it is a lot higher for universities to provide.

One of the problems is that some of these student poverty reports and surveys have shown that even students who are living in regional areas, living at home and going to campuses there or living away from home but still going to

campuses in their rural area, often have even higher rates of poverty, or some of these statistics in terms of missing meals and things like that are actually higher in those areas.

If you look at, say, the students who are attending Wodonga University — a lot of them will not be living in Wodonga, they will be living in quite a range of towns quite far away from Wodonga, so you have got much larger travel expenses statistically for students who are attending regional universities because they are often living much further away from the campus. That affects them — being able to get to those universities. I guess it is a balance.

The other thing that students at regional universities often say is they much prefer to have the support there for them to attend a university in their area, because they want to stay with their community. Community groups in those areas always say that that will stop the drain of qualified graduates to the city.

**Mr HERBERT** — Just on that point, your comment about the diversity of quality of education, I guess you would say — and I appreciate that different universities and different campuses do different things, and some actually put extra resources into rural campuses to assist kids; they often start with a lower ENTER score to get the same sorts of outcomes at the end, but given your comments on that, when the quality assurance agency audits a university, do they audit each campus or do they audit the university as a whole? Because one would think that would be a way of looking at the same quality out in a small rural campus as a Melbourne one?

**Ms COLE** — I am fairly sure they audit them campus by campus. I know that that data is being compared. I know that La Trobe University, when it looks at individuals, when a new unit or a new course is being proposed by a faculty, they have checklists they go through in terms of quality assurance for those units. Particularly recently after the review they did into regional education they really looked at how this unit would be provided in regional campuses and whether that support was there for those students. So they are looking, sort of, to improve things that way.

**Mr HERBERT** — So it was not just a video put in the face?

**Ms COLE** — Yes, I guess so. So they are looking into those things. But certainly AUQA I think has a role there.

**Mr HERBERT** — It is definitely worth our while making inquiries with the quality assurance agency.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you, Sarah. I am conscious of the time, and there are all sorts of other questions we could have asked had time been available. But is there a written response coming to us?

**Ms COLE** — I will leave just my notes, but I can put together a written report.

**The CHAIR** — If there is anything from the NUS that they want to submit in writing, then that would be much appreciated too.

**Ms COLE** — Then it is not too late, okay. Thanks.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you, Sarah.

**Witness withdrew.**

# CORRECTED VERSION

## EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

### **Inquiry into geographical differences in the rate in which Victorian students participate in higher education**

Melbourne — 14 April 2008

#### Members

Mr M. Dixon	Mr S. Herbert
Mr N. Elasmarr	Mr G. Howard
Mr P. Hall	Mr N. Kotsiras
Dr A. Harkness	

Chair: Mr G. Howard

Deputy Chair: Mr N. Kotsiras

#### Staff

Executive Officer: Ms K. Ellingford

Research Officers: Ms C. Whiteman and Ms J. Hope

Committee Administrative Officer: Ms N. Tyler

#### Witnesses

Ms R. May, industrial organiser, and

Dr S. McEachern, National Tertiary Education Union.

**The CHAIR** — Welcome, Robyn and Steve. You are aware of the issues that this inquiry is covering in regard to tertiary participation and the variations across the state in regard to that. Thank you for coming along. We are certainly looking forward to your contribution. I think you are probably aware that information shared within the bounds of this room is covered by parliamentary privilege, if that is an issue that is of relevance to you, but feel free to cover the issue as widely as you wish to on that score.

**Ms MAY** — Thanks for the opportunity for us to present our submission. Just before I start, I can briefly answer the question that you asked earlier about quality audits. It is very much our understanding that they are campus by campus.

**Dr McEACHERN** — Yes, we went to an audit about three years — I am at the University of Ballarat, and we went through it about three years ago. They visited Hong Kong and China, so it is very much about going out to the various campuses there.

**Mr HERBERT** — It would be a top job being an auditor if you did the overseas campuses.

**Ms MAY** — In terms of our submission, I just wanted to make a few comments about the submission and then leave time for questions and discussion. The National Tertiary Education Union is, as you will know, representative of general and academic staff across all universities in Australia, and in Victoria that covers the eight universities, and we also have a smaller membership in the TAFE sector in Victoria confined to non-teaching staff in TAFE.

We see two key elements in the inquiry. The first is the issues relating to the capacity for regional and rural students to attend higher education, particularly with an emphasis on access, equity and financial considerations. And the second is the point, again, that was raised later in the questions of the previous submission — the status of regional universities and campuses, their ability to attract and retain staff and students. This is in the context of regional universities and campuses being able to offer part of the solution to the question of participation rates. We want to focus our comments today on that second point.

As we note in our submission, the University of Ballarat is the only regional university in Victoria. It is based obviously in Ballarat, with campuses in Horsham, Stawell and Ararat. Deakin University has two Geelong campuses and a campus at Warrnambool, with decision-making and budget setting increasingly focused at the Burwood city campus.

La Trobe, as you have heard before, has an extensive regional campus network — again, budget and decision-making is centred at Bundoora; Bendigo was until fairly recently a stand-alone campus but is no longer; RMIT offers nursing at the Hamilton campus; Monash University has a campus at Gippsland but it has had cutbacks in recent years; and, similarly, Melbourne University has been reducing its regional campuses. In the context of active disinvestment by the previous federal government in higher education, it has been these regional campuses that have been hard hit, as they are usually at the end point of that centralised decision-making in terms of cutbacks and so on. Similarly, regional loadings supposed to support regional universities and regional campuses are woefully inadequate. That point was made very clear in a lot of the universities' submissions.

Whilst regional universities and regional campuses do not and cannot solve all the problems with access and participation, they are uniquely placed to give many students an opportunity that would otherwise not be available to them. In doing so they also offer a number of important spin-offs. Students educated in regional areas close to home tend to stay in those areas. This is particularly critical in the skill shortage areas of teaching and nursing. Young students educated in those areas will tend to keep their skills at home, and, conversely, the students who leave home to come to the city to study will typically stay in the city. They will not take their important skills back home.

The campuses themselves are also important contributors to local economies, not only through the direct benefits of offering employment but also through being important links where staff work in partnership with local organisations and businesses on valuable areas of research. That occurs a lot at the University of Ballarat and the important areas of tourism and so on. Furthermore, vibrant student populations can also bring added benefits to a regional community. Again in Ballarat, for example, the influx of many international students has had an overwhelmingly positive impact on the local community as well as, as I understand it, the local cuisine.

It is with these regional universities and campuses that we say government, both federal and state, can make a real difference — that is, with long-term, targeted, dedicated funding for those regional facilities. We note that the government has already invested in the infrastructure of regional universities and campuses, but it is also important that the effort is directed at course offerings as well as teaching, learning and research facilities. The instability that we unfortunately see in many regional campuses particularly has a big impact on community perceptions, making planning and advice for students at the school level very difficult, and compounds the downward spiral that occurs where a campus becomes increasingly unviable. The course offerings shrink and student numbers decline and that spiral feeds off itself in a negative way. These negative spirals can only be broken by dedicated and long-term funding. This long-term, dedicated funding would give students much more certainty when they are making decisions about their future — decisions about where to study and so on. It would also give staff more reason to take up job opportunities at regional campuses because staff, in particular, often take on significant disadvantage when they move to a regional campus. Often their capacity to do research is limited compared to that of their city colleagues, their opportunities for promotion are not quite as good as if they were working in the city, and often they have to teach across a broader first-year offer sort of level rather than being able to choose the courses that they would necessarily like to teach.

On the question of grants and scholarships, it is our view broadly that these often cause more problems than they fix, so we would really like to see the focus being on appropriate, dedicated, long-term funding for regional campuses of universities.

**Mr HERBERT** — Thanks very much, Robyn, for that. When the commonwealth allocates its various industry research grants, is there any incentive in there to get some research happening in regional campuses? Are there any specific grants that are focusing there?

**Dr McEACHERN** — Not that I am aware. There is certainly targeting of teaching funds, but not research funds, for regional institutions. No, as far as I am aware it is largely on a competitive basis. The only difference would be the way they handle their institutional grants, their block grant procedures, some of which is sometimes tied to research. It is a negligible amount, if anything.

**Mr HERBERT** — I cannot recall an academic I have met who has not been keen to do research — I am sure there are — because a publish-or-perish ethos exists in our universities. I do not want to categorise this, but how do you ensure that you get a fair share of really high-quality academics in rural and regional campuses? The quality of the outcomes in teaching, lecturing and tutoring is definitely the pinnacle point in terms of the quality of the education that young people get, or anyone gets. How do universities address that issue of trying to look at their staff and the mix in rural and regional campuses and ensure that they have some high-flyers in there?

**Ms MAY** — It is a difficult one. I think where universities have particular niche areas that they offer — I know at Warrnambool Deakin campus there is marine biology and a particularly appealing local environment that in itself can assist in supporting staff to come and live there — but generally the staff, as I said before, face significant disadvantage when they work in those regional campuses.

**Mr HERBERT** — I know that Deakin has a specific policy in terms of outcomes — that is a very good Warrnambool campus — but they do not actually have internal policies in place as incentives for university academics to go out and spend some time in rural and regional campuses, for example, ‘If you go out and do this and head this course up, then you get another job later’?

**Dr McEACHERN** — Perhaps I should reflect upon my experience. I have been at two Melbourne campuses — Deakin and Monash — and I have been at Ballarat for about seven years now. It was my experience certainly — and it was largely as a tutor, as a casual staff member, at those prior institutions — that I never went outside the institution, let alone outside into the community in the metropolitan institutions. The notion of community engagement in the metropolitan areas is an interesting one in and of itself. In a regional campus, doing similar sorts of research, my engagement with the community at large is almost obligatory. There is an expectation on staff, which is a very enjoyable part of the process. You talk about managing teaching and research as a community obligation — that is also there as well — which creates another set of pressures and a different sort of dynamic. I would say there is little incentive to go out into the community in the metropolitan campuses. In the regional campuses there is incentive of a sort and more of a community expectation that that will occur.

**The CHAIR** — Okay. I am interested to follow what Steve says along a little bit, because we have had a student here today who said that, although they were wanting to do drama, they would not consider going to one of the regional universities, for example — in that case it had to be VCA — but you certainly see that a number of other students coming from regional Victoria will bypass regional universities in their region because of the prestige, or whatever, associated with one of the ‘big 8’ unis or other Melbourne-based universities. What are the issues to address that?

**Ms MAY** — That is a really difficult one, because I do not see how you could have a regional campus that would match the size and scale of a Melbourne uni or a Monash uni; it is just not possible.

**The CHAIR** — No, but it is selling the quality, I suppose.

**Ms MAY** — The quality and having a broad enough course offering so that you can attract the students, and keeping the quality there.

**Dr McEACHERN** — There are some competing interests for a regional institution. The diversity of offerings required for the region as a whole necessitates a broad range of course offerings in the sense that the local labour market will demand a broad range of courses in order to supply local expectations, which spreads resources. Then you have pressure from the centre to diminish resources within the region, so you have competing budgetary pressures. The spreading of resources is going to create a situation where you are spread across subjects and spread across units as staff members, so the capacity to develop specialty expertise within that area is problematic. How could you go about achieving it?

**Mr HERBERT** — Could you target research grants as a component of commonwealth funding, which would mean more PhD students and a greater incentive for researchers to go into regional campuses?

**Dr McEACHERN** — Working along the medical basis? Yes; potentially that would be an alternative. Where is an incentive to go out into the region? The medical approach is one that certainly has had to be developed.

**Ms MAY** — Targeted research funding, but also targeted course-offering funding so that you knew that for the next 10 years X campus was going to offer a bachelor of science. The staff then have a certainty about their employment and the students have a certainty that that course is going to be offered. It is an extremely difficult one with those issues of quality and the difficulties for staff.

**Dr McEACHERN** — In the circumstances where you actually get variable funding going on, you then have pressures on staff to work at other campuses of the same institution. It is not an issue for the University of Ballarat so much as a regionally based campus, where our central authority is regionally based, but colleagues at ACU and at Deakin as well spend significant amounts of time travelling between institutions. I have a colleague who works two days a week in Melbourne and three days a week in Ballarat. She is doing 12 or 13-hour days as the basis of her work. Targeted course offerings alongside that and reducing the expectations of travel would be one way to get at that, I suppose.

**Mr HALL** — Steve and Robyn, first of all, thank you for making a submission; it is very helpful. The way I read it is that the main argument you are putting to the committee is that strengthening regional campuses is going to assist in the difference in participation rates between regional and metropolitan students. While I agree that it is going to help, do you concede it is not going to resolve the whole problem, given the fact that you are still invariably going to have course curriculum access issues with the relative size of campuses?

**Ms MAY** — Yes. We are not saying it is the whole solution — it is certainly not. We are saying it will go some part to resolving the issue, and that is a good place to start. Certainly a lot of the issues and problems that have been faced by many regional campuses could be resolved with more dedicated funding, such that there could be a lot more stability in terms of staff knowing that they have got job security and students knowing that there is a course there for them. Of course we cannot expect regional campuses to be offering everything; it is just not going to be possible.

**Mr HALL** — Do you have a view on online education and distance education?

**Ms MAY** — It is rapidly becoming a fact of life in our sector. I think the problem with it is that there is probably a perception among some university managers that it is a cheaper way of doing education when the reality

is that, if it is going to be done properly, it is more expensive. Unfortunately we see a lot of corner cutting. As an example, you heard about La Trobe students literally fronting up to a lecture theatre and it being beamed from somewhere else. Personally, I think that is an absolutely appalling way to educate, but it is one way that some universities see as overcoming the problems of distance, and it is a fact of life.

**Dr McEACHERN** — In terms of staffing, based on having developed material in both circumstances, I would say that given the amount of time that you are spending in terms of developing offline and online materials, there is more investment required in online development. It is a complement, not a substitute; that would be the best way to describe it. It is certainly being promoted as a value add, but it does not have the capacity to replace. For the sorts of reasons that I heard mentioned earlier — in terms of engagement and interaction — that is an important part of the university experience, and if we take that away — —

There are segments of the student market who could learn and would study in that way, and they would have a preference for that, but I would say that for the majority it is not a one-stop solution.

**Mr HALL** — I agree with that, too — the social interaction is important. But nevertheless, it may be, in my view at least, a tool with which you can improve some access to higher education for some.

**Dr McEACHERN** — But, again, it needs to be supported by the resources. Different institutions manage it in very different ways. Some are far better at supporting with those resources than others. If the resourcing, both for infrastructure, and for IT support and curriculum development, is not there, then it is actually a worse experience for the student.

**Ms MAY** — And if it is done properly, it is probably a more expensive solution than the face-to-face.

**Mr HALL** — I note also in your submission you suggest — I have not got the figures directly in front of me — that regional campuses tend to attract a greater proportion of local students to their campuses. Is that a good thing or a bad thing?

**Ms MAY** — I think broadly a good thing, because it means it is meeting the need of the local community in providing important opportunities for those local kids to have access to higher education close to home.

**Mr HALL** — Are you generally of the view that regional campuses do provide for local needs? Robyn, I noted your comment that Monash Gippsland has cut back on some programs. One of those was engineering, where you would have thought there would be a strong local need — and there is a strong local need. Being a member from down that way, I realise that. Do you think universities tend to offer programs to suit local needs, or is there more work that can be done in that area?

**Ms MAY** — Again, I suspect that is variable, depending on the university. I guess the problem that I have alluded to in earlier comments is that the universities that tend to run their regional campuses out of the Melbourne head office are not necessarily as attuned to those local areas as the universities such as Ballarat, which is actually based in Ballarat, so therefore very much a part of Ballarat. You get that different response. Unfortunately where budget and decision-making is centralised and it goes to the faculty and the faculty makes decisions and that regional campus is the end point of that decision, it is not necessarily best served by those models.

**Dr McEACHERN** — I would agree. I would say my point about the Ballarat offerings earlier is that I think part of that is a function of the fact that we do not have an alternate draw on our funds within different schools. The offerings are there partly because there is a belief within the upper echelons in the institution that there is a need to offer across the board. I could not talk for the other institutions, because they are simply not set up that way, but if you look at places like Southern Queensland, the University of New England, those campuses actually are regionally based. The distribution of their course offerings is relatively broad based as well.

**Mr HALL** — Perhaps one last question: what role do you see universities have in raising the aspirational level of students, particularly those in country areas? One would conclude that the sheer fact that applications for higher education are at a lower rate than those in the city is reflective of lower aspirational levels. What role do universities have in terms of lifting that aspirational level?

**Dr McEACHERN** — I would question the assumption underlying that. I do not know that necessarily there is a lower level of aspiration. I would probably argue there is a greater question of capacity to access,

particularly in terms of the resources required to attend a regional institution in terms of travel costs, accommodation costs. Given the lower income base within the regional population, the cost of attending and participating in university is higher than it is for a metropolitan student. There was reference before to a question about employment amongst regional students. I can certainly recommend the Universities Australia report ; it has got very good information on that.

I do a similar process with my students on a yearly basis. When I ask students how many of them are working — and I teach a class of 50 to 100 students at a time — I may get 5 per cent who are not working. I teach a course in industrial relations — you know, the differences of working and not working. None of them knows the experience of not working. Whether they are subsidising their lifestyle or they are subsidising the cost of living, there is a necessity of work. The question of aspiration, yes, you do get varying levels of aspiration but I think a broader concern is actually the cost of access.

**Ms MAY** — I think the evidence is that once regional and rural students get to university they do just as well as their city counterparts. It is the getting there and the opportunity cost of getting there, particularly if there are readily available jobs that they could walk into on the family farm or whatever, that is part of the problem as well.

**Mr HALL** — I must say I still think there is an aspirational issue there. I think a lot of country kids do not know what they can do, what is available to them, what opportunities could be available to them. They learn because of the people who exist within the community. If there is an architect who lives in the same town as them, they realise that they could be the same.

**Ms MAY** — Yes. Similarly, if they have got a family member who has been at university or not.

**Dr McEACHERN** — Certainly within our student population a significant proportion are first to university, so there is a role we will play there, absolutely.

**Ms MAY** — Again, that goes to the universities' devolved decision making, but if their marketing is centralised and they are not marketing X campus with its particular attractions to that community, then that community may not find out as well, whereas again Ballarat is pretty good, I think, at marketing itself to its local community and hence it picks up a lot of those local students. But that may not be the case in Gippsland or certainly in Warrnambool.

**Mr HERBERT** — I was just thinking on that comment that that probably is not that much different to some of the poorer suburbs in Melbourne's north and west in terms of low aspirations and understanding the opportunities. If you do not come from a household or a community where education is valued, it is hard to get those aspirations.

**Ms MAY** — Yes, exactly.

**Mr HERBERT** — The question goes back to Peter's point and the discussion about the relative merits of videoconferencing. My experience, from what I have spoken with people about, is that there is nothing more boring than a group of people turning up to university lectures for the whole day and watching a tiny screen, with little interaction. It is very difficult in fact to engage in that process in many ways. Coming back to the original question on the quality assurance agency and how it monitors that, does it have an opinion about the quality? One would think that given the rapid changes in the way of delivering education, it would have an opinion or it would be part of its audit, that type of quality. Does it come in and say, 'This isn't best practice?'

**Dr McEACHERN** — As I say, I cannot recall what its remit is in that regard, having participated in the process.

**Mr HERBERT** — I am on your point, and you say it is quite diverse, and that some of it is very good and some of it is very poor. One would think that in the auditing process that would be picked up.

**Dr McEACHERN** — I would have to suggest referring to the AUQA group to investigate that further, plus some of the good work that is done in our centres for higher education within the universities.

**Ms MAY** — Because often it can look like it is going to be great. You get the podcast and the this and the that, but the reality is that the student rolls up, the machinery breaks down, there is no-one to help you out, you are stuck there — —

**Dr McEACHERN** — I would say the students like having that, as I say, as a complement, as a backup, but in my experience it is not a first preference.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you for your contribution. It has been very useful, and of course we have got your written submission to follow up on.

**Witnesses withdrew.**



# CORRECTED VERSION

## EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

### **Inquiry into geographical differences in the rate in which Victorian students participate in higher education**

Melbourne — 14 April 2008

#### Members

Mr M. Dixon	Mr S. Herbert
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Committee Administrative Officer: Ms N. Tyler

#### Witness

Mr G. Fryatt, chairman, Victorian Farmers Federation, Education Committee.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you, Gilbert. We will get straight under way. Thank you very much for coming along. You are clearly aware of the issues that we are generally looking at in this inquiry, and I am sure you have got lots of insights as well as advice you would like to offer, and then we will probably have some questions as well in this regard.

**Mr FRYATT** — We decided with our approach today that we would just give you a little bit of background of the Victorian Farmers Federation, but in addition to that, what we are really trying to say today is it is not just farmers who are affected by distance education, it is everybody who lives away from metropolitan Melbourne who is really affected and needs some encouragement or assistance. The Victorian Farmers Federation is Australia's largest state farmer organisation, and we believe that we are consistent on issues affecting rural Victoria. As a key beneficiary of education and training, the Victorian farming community has a strong interest in the long-term provision of quality education and training. Sustaining resilient, vibrant rural communities is important to the future of both the farming sector and the business community.

A key concern of the farming sector is the low participation of young people from rural and regional areas in post-compulsory education. I will refer to some of the suggested solutions. We believe that the Victorian state government must provide a more sustainable and exportable funding model for rural education, recognising the higher costs incurred by rural and regional students attending post-compulsory training. We are talking about increasing transport subsidies. We are not really talking about the actual student here. For example, I know there is a student studying in Adelaide, and he can get back to Warracknabeal, which is my home town, for \$20. What we are really concerned about is the cost for parents. An example is that I live at Warracknabeal, and our daughter attended Warrnambool campus. That is 300 kilometres. There is no link of transport one way or the other. Each time that she wanted to come home for a weekend because she was an only child and was homesick, our family had to do 1200 kilometres in the car. We had to pick her up Friday afternoon and then drive back Sunday afternoon. My wife and I were exhausted after a thing like that.

With regard to accommodation allowances, we are concerned about a reasonable living-away allowance that really recognises the true costs. A person I spoke to last year had a first year as a student at Melbourne University on campus. Apart from his out-of-pocket expenses, he told me it cost him \$13 000 for year one, plus all the other travelling that the family had to do. The other thing is the pressure that it puts on the family that is concerned. In that example, because the father was a grain grower, he would have to knock off right in the middle of harvest. Because his wife was a schoolteacher, she could not get the day off to come down, pick up all the stuff from the university — all the clothes and all that sort of stuff — and bring it back home again.

We think there needs to be a review of the current pathways to higher education and an increase in the opportunities for young people to access higher education. We believe that there is a bit of a lack of programs at TAFE and secondary school level. I will drag that back in later.

We acknowledge that, for example, Ballarat University has a system that recognises Longerenong College diplomas, whereby students who reach the end of their diploma at Longerenong can immediately go on and take a degree course at Ballarat University. We recognise that that is a good thing. Between Jenny Frederiksen and me, we are not too sure whether that is a widespread thing across the state. If it is in place, it would be excellent, but if it is not, we think it would be good if it could be encouraged.

Rural providers need adequate resources to provide a breadth of curriculum, which the previous group were talking about. They need funding to make sure that those opportunities are there. The other problem going along with that is getting the skilled people out to the university campuses. I was talking to one of our senior members of the local shire council of Yarriambiack. Quite often they have to pay more for a person of a certain standard to come and live and work in their community — and the universities would be the same — because they do not want to leave the metropolitan area. You quite often have to entice them with either some subsidised housing or something else to get the people there.

We like the thing that happens at Armidale, which is basically a university town. There are quite a few of them around the world. Orange and Armidale are a couple of examples of that. In my local patch Longerenong is just Longerenong — there is no real town there. There is a little hotel some 5 kilometres away which does quite well out of the students. That is something that would make it easier to draw people to regional campuses if they were not just stuck out in the middle of nowhere.

We thought that there should be a review of the student allowance. I do not have to tell you that to get the student allowance they need to be out of education for 18 months. The problem that we see here is the fact that it is 18 months and not 12 months; they become eligible to get their funding in the middle of the year. So then the family has to decide whether it is going to let them start in the middle of the year or whether it will fork the money out and try and survive by whatever means it can for the first semester to get them through — by borrowing money or asking parents, grandparents or other family members for help. I realise it is a federal thing, but we would support you if you were lobbying for that sort of thing.

We thought that targeted initiatives could be developed to attract postgraduates into the rural community, such as subsidies for people to live there or some sort of incentive to draw people there. If you could get the same sort of job in Melbourne as you could get in Horsham, why would you bother going to live in Horsham? But if you went to live in Horsham, you would realise how good it is and how good the lifestyle is. I can give you lots of examples of people who have moved from the city at an early age and taken up a job and wished that they had come 20 years before.

We were concerned about the relevance to rural communities of the placement of graduates during their training. What I am trying to say there is that if, for example, veterinary students who come to work in the country have done all of their training in Melbourne, they will have worked not on larger animals but on the smaller domesticated animals. I have had personal experience of a graduate trying to take blood samples out of some rams of mine. I thought it was really quite funny, but really I should have taken it much more seriously. She was a young girl — she was only about 23 or 24 — and she was trying to get a syringe into the jugular vein of a ram. I should have been helping her rather than having a grin.

We feel that if a lot of the other graduates — and not only vets but also doctors and nurses and those sorts of people — could be encouraged to do part of their training outside of metropolitan Melbourne, they might even like to come there. I know Horsham and Nhill have a huge number of surgeons and specialists who come there. Nhill particularly has a very high regard for the surgeons who come there. Hip replacements and quite major surgery are done in Nhill. I tried to explain it to Alan Stockdale one day when he was visiting Horsham. I said, 'Surely it is easier to bring the fit and healthy surgeon to the sick and ill patient in the country rather than having them risk being transported by ambulance by road or spending 2 hours in an aeroplane and then travelling for half an hour or an hour from the Essendon airport to wherever they are having their surgery'. He did not agree with me.

We think there should be more scholarships out there. My Warracknabeal branch of the Victorian Farmers Federation actually won the branch of the year award a year ago. We got \$2000 as our prize. We have decided to offer a \$500 scholarship to a vet student at the Warracknabeal Secondary College.

Since then we have been able to encourage some of our other financial institutions, particularly the banks and major companies around the country, to help. We have actually got a five-year rotation where the ANZ Bank, Bendigo Bank and Wesfarmers — Landmark I should say — are going to continue the sponsorship to encourage students. We would like to think that a student who lived halfway between Murtoa or Horsham might come to our campus at Warracknabeal because there was a chance they could get a scholarship there, rather than just going to Murtoa where there was no chance of a scholarship. If you are on the receiving end of a scholarship, it certainly does help with the cost of tertiary education.

For those who have had the experience, which I have, it is a rather expensive pastime. When our daughter was going to primary school nothing cost any more than \$100. When she went to secondary college it was still in the hundreds, but when she got to tertiary education it was always a four-figure amount for everything that was needed: it was a car, it was a bond, and it was paying for the semester and the books and all that sort of stuff. Fortunately my mother was able to support me a little bit in that regard to help our daughter get the education she needed. She has been successful, and we are very proud of her.

The last one is probably out of your area; it is point 9 in our submission about improved access to information technology. What we are talking about here is the broadband situation in the country. It is very variable. When talking to Jenny Frederiksen today I found that it even varies in the suburb where she lives. She can get it, and three streets away they can't. Broadband is definitely getting better. My accountant, who lives probably 200 metres away from me, has always had a great system. Fortunately I have caught up, but if I had been trying to run my business from my house like her, the system could not have coped with it because it was completely inadequate.

They are the points we thought of regarding a solution; you will probably have heard them several times today.

**The CHAIR** — There were a number of those, but it is very good that you put those points together that way. Thank you, Gilbert.

**Mr ELASMAR** — Are you are telling us that more funding and more scholarships and things like that will build the student numbers up higher if communications with the city are improved?

**Mr FRYATT** — That is one of our propositions. We believe that if that were available, it would help. I was quoted in the *Weekly Times* about three weeks ago speaking about distance education and how much it cost. They said it has doubled, but it could be triple or quadruple the cost if you take in all of the costs involved. When our daughter left home she wanted another computer. She said, 'I am taking that one', so Dad had to buy himself a new one, didn't he. There is all that sort of stuff. There were things happening at the university and the computer got a virus. I said, 'You will have to have your own machine so you can get your work in on time'.

**Mr ELASMAR** — The other thing is kids leaving home and coming to the city. What is the feeling of the parents? Would you say the majority would they support this or would they stop them?

**Mr FRYATT** — It would help. It is quite difficult. I am amazed at how my daughter has coped. She lived in a little town of 3000, and now she lives in the biggest city of Australia and drives around like she owns the place. Some people get homesick, and I know our daughter did. I was an only child; I went away to a private boarding school and I got homesick. I think it is natural that you would be homesick, and it is good just to see your parents and to get them to come down. That is what my parents used to do when I was a student, so I cannot imagine it would be any different now. I know communications are better and everybody has a mobile phone and you can text one another, but it is not the same as actually giving your kid a hug.

**Mr HALL** — Gilbert, first of all, thank you for the submission and, in her absence, please thank Jenny for it, too. We appreciate that.

**Mr FRYATT** — I will do that.

**Mr HALL** — If, as you say in your submission, you look at the completion rates particularly for some kids in some country areas, including yours, completing year 12 — to get to university the first thing you have to do is complete year 12. If they are not completing year 12 at the same rate, then you will not get them participating at university at the same rate. Can you give us any insight into why kids in your area are perhaps not completing year 12 at the same level as the city kids are?

**Mr FRYATT** — It has a little bit to do with the careers teachers that are in the schools. We at the VFF think that that is an area that we need to get to, the career teachers. We are not saying that they are biased; it is just that we feel that they are uninformed. We would like to see a bit better balance in some of the advice that they are giving the students. I guess it is no different down here from what it is like in the country. The trades are fairly easy to get into, or easier to get into. You can take up an apprenticeship if you can find an owner or business that will put you on — because it is fairly arduous, the paperwork and that sort of thing. I think they are a bit more inclined to do that because they can get in and all of a sudden they can see, 'Yes, in four years time I'll be a qualified plumber' — or a chippie — 'And I can name my own price and work when I want to, rather than having to come to Melbourne for four years and then I've got to go and find a job'. All the figures are out there. They are not going on, like you say.

I have not had a tertiary education. If I had my time over again, I do not know that I would want one, anyway. I am more a hands-on sort of person. My trade is professional wool classer and I have been one for more than 30 years. It is quite a good trade: the pay is pretty good and you do not have to have much equipment. All you have to be is fit — you have to be able to walk, and run sometimes.

I guess a lot of rural people are more hands on, sort of thing. Some of the school trips, when they come to Melbourne for the first time to see what city life is like, really open their eyes.

**Mr HALL** — Do you think we should be doing more of that — that is, giving the kids the experience of coming and having a look around universities and visiting professional organisations in Melbourne?

**Mr FRYATT** — Yes, most definitely. Last year I brought a friend of mine who is a similar age to me, 59, down here. We came down to the Melbourne races. It was the third time he had been to Melbourne. He said, ‘Don’t leave me behind, Gilbert, don’t leave me behind!’. Nine of us came down and we stayed in the city and used the train, went out to Caulfield and had a great day. He has just no idea — that is that big place, down in Melbourne, where all those millions of people live. He has just no experience of it.

**The CHAIR** — On that score, would Warracknabeal Secondary College not have a program where its students — —

**Mr FRYATT** — Yes, it does.

**The CHAIR** — I would have thought that most of the secondary schools now have that sort of program. They may have reason to extend it, but they are at least trying to overcome some of those — —

**Mr FRYATT** — Yes, to break down the barriers. I mean, with the internet you only have to do a Google search and you can find out about and get a photo of anything almost anywhere in the world, if you want to. With Google Earth you can get a photo of absolutely anything — your backyard — anywhere.

**The CHAIR** — Yes, but I guess what we are talking about are those opportunities to come to Melbourne, put students on public transport and let them get the feel of how to get around, if they need to come down later on.

**Mr FRYATT** — Yes.

**Mr HALL** — Do you have any feeling about the impact of Melbourne University’s decision to cut off the various faculties from the old Victorian College of Agriculture and Horticulture? Has that impacted on the opportunities for country kids to study agriculture or related courses?

**Mr FRYATT** — I have to be careful about what I say about Melbourne University, so I will not say what I would like to. Yes, it has, but I guess the thing that really gets up our noses a little bit is that they have to do their first year — in ag science, for example — in Melbourne. They have to come to Melbourne whether they want to or not, and then they can go back out. I guess the university has its reason for that. It would be a lot easier once you got used to it, having been in the university lifestyle. If you had a year in Bendigo or Ballarat, where mum and dad were only probably a couple of hours away, it would make it easier. They have done quite a bit. I have often said that they should be in the Olympic Games with the backflip that they did.

**The CHAIR** — Just in terms of what you were saying on that score, are you saying that is for the ag degree that — —

**Mr FRYATT** — Ag science, I believe.

**The CHAIR** — Yes, so you can come to Melbourne for the — —

**Mr FRYATT** — You have to come to Melbourne.

**The CHAIR** — Yes, but then you can do — —

**Mr FRYATT** — You can go back and do it at Glenormiston, I think.

**The CHAIR** — At Glenormiston.

**Mr FRYATT** — That is what I have been told. I am on a fairly steep learning curve with this education role; I have only been chairman for a few months. I read the papers with a different view now. I cut stuff out and put it on the fax machine and send it to Jenny and say, ‘Did you read that?’.

**The CHAIR** — All right. What is the difference in Longerenong, for example, in terms of the course offerings there post the Melbourne uni departure?

**Mr FRYATT** — I am not really informed as to all of the nuts and bolts exactly, but I know that Workco is doing a really, really good job. I know Jacinta Allan’s department is keen to have somebody else look after that campus, and that is why the tender process was redone to encourage Ballarat University to tender as well. We had

quite a long talk to her advisers. We just could not convince them that Workco is quite a big company and it is doing a very good job.

**Mr HALL** — I think the problem is the disaggregation of all of those country campuses — —

**Mr FRYATT** — Yes.

**Mr HALL** — If you have different organisations running each one of them it creates some problems in terms of cooperative efforts across the whole of them.

**Mr FRYATT** — Yes, that is probably true.

**Mr HALL** — That was a comment not a question.

**Mr HERBERT** — I just wonder how that fits in with the competition, whether it is good policy. Just on your issue of advocating scholarships as a good way of getting young people to study in the country at country campuses, if the government was to look at that type of proposition, would you think it should be targeted primarily — at least in the first case — to skill or professional shortage areas?

**Mr FRYATT** — I guess that is a yes, but when I say ‘the government’ there are a lot of other companies out there like the multinationals that offer scholarships. My wife’s niece was a beneficiary because she is a geologist. It is not necessarily a government’s role 100 per cent of the time because BHP and Rio Tinto and those sorts of companies have bags of money. If the government was able to encourage them, through its tax office returns — let us face it, there used to be an investment allowance for farming. If you built something then you got a 120 per cent deduction. If Rio or BHP or Iluka Resources, just to talk about the mining companies, were able to be given a 120 per cent deduction if they sponsored five for each campus or something across rural Victoria I think it would be wonderful. There is lots of mining going on in our area around Donald with the mineral sands, and up north.

**Mr HERBERT** — Just one final question from me in regard to rural people. We have not heard much about indigenous people and getting indigenous people to lift their aspirations in terms of tertiary education. Are you aware of anything being done in any rural setting that actually targets indigenous people to try to increase their qualifications and get academic qualifications?

**Mr FRYATT** — I believe there is at Swan Hill, but I do not think there is very much at Longerenong. There are not a lot of indigenous people living in the Wimmera to my knowledge. There are quite a few but not a lot. Looking at the graduates that come through Ballarat University, there are a few that are coming through but I do not really know what the system is to draw them in. I know the Catchment Management Authority was looking for an indigenous executive officer to look after the areas that were zoned off for the catchment management. I know they had an extremely long advertising period to get somebody because they had to be qualified. They had to have a degree in land and resources or something or other, which is offered but to get one of those sorts of people through I guess they probably need encouragement.

**Mr HERBERT** — It might be the sort of thing that BHP or some of the other — —

**Mr FRYATT** — Yes, exactly. Well, they are pretty good at upsetting indigenous people, aren’t they?

**The CHAIR** — Thank you very much, Gilbert.

**Mr FRYATT** — Thank you for listening to us today. We appreciate that.

**Committee adjourned.**