

CORRECTED VERSION

EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

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

Canberra — 17 June 2008

Members

Mr M. Dixon
Mr N. Elasmar
Mr P. Hall
Dr A. Harkness

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Witnesses

Mr M. Gallagher, executive director, and
Mr T. Payne, deputy executive director, Group of Eight.

The CHAIR — I am pleased to declare the hearing of the education and training committee open. The committee, as you would be aware, is hearing evidence today on geographical differences as they relate to Victorian students participating in higher education. I should advise you that this morning's hearing is a formal hearing. Parliamentary privilege does apply to you in anything you share with us. I do not know whether you need to take advantage of that, but I advise you of that.

It is good to have you with us, Michael and Tim, to share with us some of the issues associated with the Group of Eight and your perceptions on the issue and how it might be better addressed. We will give you some time to address us and then we will follow up with some questions and the opportunity to discuss some of those issues with you.

Mr GALLAGHER — The material that we have been given suggests you have got a fairly wide agenda when you are looking at access and equity and contributions from regional higher education institutions.

The CHAIR — Generally speaking, that is right.

Mr GALLAGHER — There are a number of connections where we could have some dialogue with you. There is the broad policy framework affecting access, the scale of the sector and the operation of institutions; then there are strategies that different institutions use that can be facilitated or impeded by government policy and financing arrangements. It is a question of what focus you want to take. Do you want to look at the macro policy dimensions or do you want to look at the institutional strategic directions?

The CHAIR — In one of our earlier hearings we spoke with the Vice Chancellor of Monash University on some issues. We are generally looking to get a feel for some of the strategies that the Group of Eight might have taken to overcome those issues of students from regions being able to come to the university; issues of accommodation and so on; as well as their being accepted; those from lower socioeconomic areas, perhaps in metropolitan areas.

Mr GALLAGHER — Let me preface my answer by saying that there are some policy issues for us. The commonwealth government controls the volume of student places and the price of those places. Our organisation has advocated some deregulation of the volume and price controls that are exercised. Our argument is that, if the institutions had more flexibility to admit the numbers of students that they thought appropriate in different courses that they are able to provide and were free to charge the rate that they think recovers their costs, then you would get an improvement in equity of access and you would get an improvement in quality provision.

The quid pro quo in terms of equity would be that the Australian system would be better able to perform more like the American system in trading off the price for some students who are disadvantaged from the surpluses they would generate from the fee income from other students. That could be negotiated also through government, state and federal, as is done in the US where the rate of the government subvention has regard to the fee income that the institutions can obtain. You can get a balance in that way.

We produced a paper last year, prior to the election — and we can give you summary copies of it — which calls for the broader relaxation of some of the current controls of higher education financing and the volume of student places. We are happy to take that further, but that would require a policy change.

The second policy issue, which is important in that context but also in the current context, is that if universities themselves or external benefactors or, indeed, state governments provide scholarship assistance in the form of income support to students, then that income is taken into account for the youth allowance. There is a disincentive, therefore, for institutions and others to provide scholarships to students because it means that they lose their income support. Indeed, the Group of Eight had a scheme which we had to abandon.

Again, we are advocating to the federal government that they should exempt from income those forms of scholarship support from universities themselves or from other providers. Tim can go into further detail on that, if you are interested. They are two broad policy questions.

The third policy question is that the commonwealth government at the moment has indicated that it will

pursue the notion of mission-based funding compacts with each university. We have produced a mini discussion paper on some of the issues there — I only have one copy, but we can send it to you electronically if you wish — which raises some of the options. The advantage of that compact model is that it will allow state governments, with the commonwealth, to negotiate individually with each university on how they best service their regional communities, the scale of their programs, the direction of them, the relevance to the labour market of their graduates, the equity priorities for access. All of those issues, which, I think, go to the heart of your concerns, can be taken up in that compact policy framework.

The paper raises some questions. As we understand it, there will be a discussion paper issued by the commonwealth later this month. The two departments involved, the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations and the Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research, will be going around and having dialogue with institutions over this year. The committee that Denise Bradley is heading, on the review of higher education, which reports in October, will have something to say about that as well. By the end of the year, we hope there will be clarity around that.

Finally, we are holding an international symposium on costs and compacts. There are two events, one in Canberra and one in Melbourne. If it was your inclination, we would be happy to extend an invitation to you to participate. We are bringing international speakers from the United States, the UK and New Zealand. They are on about access and participation.

The Americans particularly are interested in Hispanic and black access, the containment of costs and prices and the relationships of state governments, through their broad funding arrangements, with the universities. The British have a system called widening participation, which is like a third-stream funding program to encourage improved access and the relationship of universities to schools and communities. The New Zealand speaker is strong on Maori access and strategies for Indigenous participation.

We are hoping that there will be a lot of informative presentations. If some of you want to come to that, you would be most welcome.

The CHAIR — That is on 16 July at the University of Melbourne?

Mr GALLAGHER — Yes. They are some broad framework issues. Within that, we are happy to talk about strategies. Again, I have a piece of paper which breaks down for our own universities, the Group of Eight, participation by different classes of equity groups, that is, students from non-English speaking backgrounds; students with a disability, whether it is in non-traditional areas; Indigenous students; low socioeconomic status students; regional students; and remote students.

One of the distinguishing features the Group of Eight draws is that more than half of the commencing domestic students each year come directly from school. Across the sector, only about 25 per cent come directly from school. Some institutions have large proportions of their commencing cohort that are adult learners or second-chance learners. It happens across the world that the institutions that attract a dominant proportion of young talent tend to be the elite institutions. Our group is characterised primarily by being responsible for about 70 per cent of the university research effort. That research prestige leads itself to attracting talent, both academic staff and students.

Naturally, therefore, when you look at school success, educational attainment in school, which correlates pretty much with student readiness which correlates pretty much with parental means, the Group of Eight draws disproportionately from the more affluent families. We are conscious of that. In the statistics which we have just shown you, we are lower than the national average for participation of low socioeconomic status students. That is why we are anxious to look at broader strategies for increasing access.

Looking at that in the context of wanting to safeguard the standards of education, you do not want a situation where you are artificially wanting to bring in more students to satisfy a socioeconomic target, if that results in a lowering of quality. Conversely, you do not want to set students up for failure by bringing in students who cannot pass at standards that are expected.

Some strategies that are being looked at within our group are to draw students who just miss out on a mark that would normally get them into a place and provide, for instance, at the Australian National University, an

associate degree program of one year, which is a readiness program to make up for deficits so that the passing of that program then enables them to move into the mainstream program. All the evidence is that, once students gain access, they can succeed as well as students that have achieved better than them in schools, so long as they can make up the readiness deficits. We have an example of that at the ANU. There are variants on this within our group.

There are also measures to attend to the schools themselves and try to improve the preparedness of students in the schooling streams, in particular feeder schools to the different institutions. Some of our universities have targeted particular schools, including rural and regional schools, and they will target a percentage of the top cohort for preferential access to the university by lowering the mark or providing supplementary programs in those schools.

Again at the ANU, there is an effort to reach out into mathematics and science. There is an ANU college where the participating schools in the ACT region can send their students and their teachers to the ANU college to be taught by academic staff from the science faculty. That improves teacher development and student achievement in mathematics and science-related subjects so that they have better opportunities to progress.

The CHAIR — Is that a full-time study as in a VCE or is it an actual college?

Mr GALLAGHER — Yes, it is a college.

The CHAIR — What year levels does it cover?

Mr GALLAGHER — Years 11 and 12. Maybe I will stop there and let you ask some specific questions.

Mr PAYNE — I can talk a bit about what the Group of Eight has tried to do as a group to address equity and access.

Mr KOTSIRAS — That was going to be my first question. I hear what you are saying about the commonwealth and how it should be making changes. What is a typical way it could change things?

Mr PAYNE — It sort of leads back into what Michael was talking about earlier with the bigger policy problem and the interaction between scholarships and the youth allowance income support system. If we go back five years, the Group of Eight established an equity and merit scholarship scheme where every university was offering scholarships from \$5,000 to \$6,000, I think. It was only a small scheme, about 125 students, but it was targeted at people from low socioeconomic backgrounds, high achievers.

The problem with that was that for every dollar that we provided in scholarship support, after a certain level they lost the same amount of money off their youth allowance. That is a big disincentive for universities to set up such scholarships. But it is not just universities; state government scholarships would be the same. Philanthropy: it is hard to get donations to set up such scholarships because of the treatment.

So in 2003 we were engaging with the government on this as they reformed the higher education package that went through parliament, and the outcome was that the commonwealth government changed the treatment of their own scholarships, so commonwealth scholarships for equity measures are now exempted as income under the social security means test but all other scholarships are still treated the same. So I think two years ago our board made the decision to discontinue that scheme. We have still been pressing on that and will be pressing it again through the review that is now underway. It is one simple measure that we think could be addressed through some simple changes to the social security act.

The CHAIR — One of the things we have heard, for example, from some of the regions we have travelled to is that where students have gone on to Melbourne or Monash universities on a lot of occasions they have found it difficult to get accommodation in student housing near the universities. There also seems to be an issue sometimes of students, as the only one from their town, coming down to the big smoke, as it were, and feeling pretty vulnerable and in need of support. I am interested in whether you believe your universities are addressing those issues of providing support for those vulnerable students who may be from the regions or

may be from some areas of Melbourne even.

Mr GALLAGHER — Probably the most fully developed example is at the University of New South Wales, where they have a mentoring scheme. Third-year students are given responsibility for first-year students to help their settlement into the institution and their general adjustment. I think some of that is targeted to students who come from backgrounds that are new to higher education or from isolated areas. That is the most advanced one that I am aware of but there are variants of that in each of the institutions, where senior students volunteer effectively to take responsibility for the progress of students in the commencing year.

There are student services as well that are established in terms of counselling, clubs and societies and various other arrangements that exist through the student guilds.

The CHAIR — Were they affected by the change in the union levy or whatever, the student services levy, do you know?

Mr GALLAGHER — Our group has tended to internally subsidise the continuation of those programs for a number of reasons: one, to make sure there is a student voice, particularly in terms of feedback on courses, and a student voice in different decision-making forums of the institution. Also, there is a view most strongly held in our group about the nature of the university experience, and part of that is this wider extracurricular community function of the university. So that has been protected to a large extent within the Group of Eight.

This is only from what I have seen in the newspapers really, but the voluntary student unionism changes have had a larger effect on some of the other institutions that have had to withdraw student support and facilities.

Mr PAYNE — Can I just say too on the accommodation issue that there has been a study out of the new equity and access research centre at the University of South Australia which has found that financial issues are a real problem for people from regional centres accessing education in the cities. It comes back to the means test issue again. If our universities wanted to provide accommodation for free to such students, it is treated as valuable consideration under the social security means test, so it is just treated as income, and then they lose their financial support. So why would you provide such support if you are going to take the money away from the students that they need to survive, to live on?

Mr GALLAGHER — There is another policy option that is worth giving some consideration to. In Australia we have a HECS or a fee help loan, an income contingent loan, and that is restricted to the tuition price; no other costs can be put onto that loan. Given rental prices, there is an argument that the living costs of students should also be able to be put onto a HECS basis so that the total package cost of study is what counts. That avoids up-front barriers to access and it would be a more affordable long-term means for government than through a grant system.

Mr KOTSIRAS — What would be the one single change that would have the biggest impact in attracting disadvantaged students or students from regional Victoria or regional New South Wales to attend university? If there is one change that you would say would have the biggest impact, what would it be?

Mr GALLAGHER — Deregulation. If with the deregulation you said you wanted the university to reflect its community and it was deregulated in terms of its volume and price, the institutions would respond in different ways. The whole system would be much more responsive.

Mr PAYNE — If you look at the US and the number of students at their elite institutions that are on scholarships, it is up to 30 or 40 per cent of the cohort. Across the Group of Eight I think the number of undergraduate scholarships provided—I will have to check the numbers back in the office—is probably about 2,000 to 3,000 in total, which would be under 10 per cent. So they earn greater income and put the money back into supporting socioeconomically disadvantaged students with talent, and then they have the proper tax treatment so that it does not affect them in other areas at all.

Mr GALLAGHER — Let me put the deregulation argument in context. You have domestic undergraduate students, you have domestic postgraduate students and you have higher degree research students and then you have international undergraduate students and international postgraduate students. Only

domestic undergraduate students are controlled in terms of volume and price; the rest of the sector is deregulated. So universities can do all sorts of arrangements with other countries for the disadvantaged students from those countries, but we cannot do it for own domestic undergraduate students. It is just this anomaly that is politically — —

Mr KOTSIRAS — Are there any universities in the Group of Eight which work together in regional centres offering courses or do they tend to stand alone? Is Monash University working with another university to cater for an area in some part of regional Australia do you know? If not, should perhaps universities be looking at some corporation or partnership?

Mr GALLAGHER — There are a number of regional campuses of the Group of Eight but I am scratching my head to think where there are joint precincts involving the Group of Eight. There are joint precincts like, say, Nerimba in western Sydney which includes a government secondary school, a Catholic secondary school, a TAFE college and the University of Western Sydney. That is a very attractive model and one that could be replicated in many regions, I would have thought, and be a very cost-effective approach and provide pathways for students of all ages and backgrounds.

The emergence of that comes out of the discussion in this compacts paper. The original discussion paper on that talked about this notion of a hub and spokes where some institutions become the centre which is resourced with the infrastructure and others can access it. It was thought of in terms of, for instance, Charles Sturt University in New South Wales, where there is a teacher of physics who teaches into an engineering program. Charles Sturt at Wagga or Albury cannot sustain the infrastructure for research in physics so it makes sense for that physicist to have access to another university's physics laboratories and do their work there.

Similarly, in terms of education and scholarship development, you can see the opportunity for academics to keep pace with their field by spending time with colleagues in another institution. One example recently is that the ANU, with the University of South Australia, has developed an agreement for engineering students so that kids that are coming into the University of South Australia and are progressing well and have an interest or aptitude in areas that stretch the capacity of that university can then transfer into the ANU's program. Similarly, ANU students who want to move out of the forms of engineering that ANU specialises in to go into the engineering that the University of South Australia specialises in have that opportunity. So there are the beginnings of new discussion about collaboration and it is really opportune in the context of the higher education review to start looking at some new models.

Mr PAYNE — It is possible also, thinking about models for accessing expertise in universities directly into regional schools, problems with advanced maths and science teaching in particularly public schools and regional areas and, if the students are not studying those courses, then there are issues for accessing the top universities. But with the federal government's investment in broadband fibre there is potential for perhaps provision of professional development training directly from the university into the schools and this would all come back into the compacts model that Mike was talking about. A university could say that this was what it wanted to do; to have an outreach service into schools, supported by IT and face-to-face visits or whatever. I do not know about Victoria so much but in New South Wales there are many problems with getting good-quality maths, physics and chemistry teachers in the schools, and declining interest in those areas. Some way of identifying kids with talent from those areas early and then providing that sort of access through technology is a possibility.

Mr KOTSIRAS — So you are saying the best way to encourage the Group of Eight to expand into regional centres would be to regulate the industry?

Mr GALLAGHER — No, not a regulation model. The compact model is a mission-driven model where the institution defines its mission and identifies its strengths. Rather than try and develop something that is not within its mission or not one of its strengths, it would be better to collaborate with some other institution whose mission is of that kind and does have those strengths, which should be driven from the bottom up rather than through a regulatory model.

Mr DIXON — Of the Group of Eight, have they all got regional campuses? Which university would be the most regionalised of the eight?

Mr GALLAGHER — Monash.

Mr DIXON — Yes.

Mr GALLAGHER — Queensland has a few, including Ipswich. They are not really that far out. The University of Western Australia has Albany. But they are mostly metropolitan.

Mr DIXON — But Monash would be — —

Mr GALLAGHER — The University of Sydney had an Agricultural college in Orange in New South Wales. Charles Sturt University has taken it over in the last few years.

Mr DIXON — All right.

The CHAIR — Of course, the University of Melbourne did have, so there has been a bit of movement away from those. I do not know whether you want to make comment about the challenges that face universities looking at whether they can offer courses in the regions.

Mr GALLAGHER — I think that for our universities, the world has changed over the last decade in terms of the pressure to be competitive internationally. For Australia to be able to access the world stock of knowledge, we have to be a player ourselves and a contributor. It is getting more and more costly to keep pace with the rest of the world in some of the areas of research that require big infrastructure, and the pace of knowledge advancement is such that you would have to continue to specialise.

Pressuring institutions to focus on those things that they can do best by international standards is what needs to be done. The downside of that can be that areas of local pull on those institutions cannot be met at the same time, unless there is some other program that identifies the fact that universities now play multiple roles in contemporary society, not just teaching and research. Communities expect universities to do other things in those regions.

As with the UK, you then provide another funding stream that acknowledges these different functions. If you do not, you have to cross-subsidise, either from your teaching vote or from your research vote. If you cross-subsidise from either, you lower the quality necessarily, and you slip behind the standards of the rest of the world, and that is what our guys are trying to balance.

If you wanted to do something apart from deregulation to make a big difference, it would be, I think, to properly fund each of the activities that universities are expected to undertake — that is, properly fund research. It is not properly funded at the moment; it is cross-subsidised. You need to properly fund teaching. All of that is cross-subsidised off international students. You need to pay that proper price, and then if you want additional activities you need to pay for the additional activity or create incentives for institutions to be able to get the revenue for that additional activity.

The CHAIR — Can I just go back to the issue you raised about having the secondary school or the senior secondary component. The challenge, of course, is that if they are staffed by university staff, they are paid at a higher rate, so I am wondering how that is funded or whether there are secondary teachers trained through the university.

Mr GALLAGHER — These are subjects that the students can undertake as part of their higher school certificate. They are taught within the university environment by a combination of school teachers and university staff. There is a transfer of knowledge for professional development for the teachers. We can get material that can explain the details of the payment arrangements.

The CHAIR — Is that funded then through the territory government?

Mr GALLAGHER — Yes, the ACT government makes a contribution to that, yes.

Mr PAYNE — But it also allows for identification earlier of students that need to get that advanced

training to move into that.

Mr GALLAGHER — We can get you details of that.

The CHAIR — Victoria is looking at that model for a couple of areas with linking schools and working in combination with the universities. So that helps to address that issue.

Mr PAYNE — But the real challenge is how do you do that for the regions as well?

The CHAIR — Yes, that is right. There are no further questions. As you are leaving, to sum up, I am of the view that you are saying that the Group of Eight, while some of the universities might see a role in regional Victoria, would see your role more as supporting students who have good skill levels but maybe inhibited or otherwise limited in coming to your universities by providing some financial support, if you are given the opportunity. Is that a fair summary?

Mr GALLAGHER — That is true, I think, but also in a better funding environment there would be option to do more things.

The CHAIR — Thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.

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Dr G. Withers, chief executive officer, and

Ms K. Dreghorn, policy officer, Universities Australia.

The CHAIR — Thank you for coming along to speak to us in regard to our inquiry on the geographical variations of participation in universities or higher education. We appreciate the contribution of Universities Australia. If you are happy to share with us some of your views on the issues as to how they might be addressed or what is the present situation on how they might be addressed, then we will have some questions to follow up.

Dr WITHERS — I do not know that what we say will differ substantially from what you may have heard from our colleagues in the Group of Eight, partly because the major contribution we can make in a formal sense is with respect to a research inquiry that was chaired by Alan Robson, who is the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Western Australia, one of the Group of Eight. The analysis that we did was on behalf of all 38 members of our organisation. We represent all the universities except one; the University of Notre Dame is not a member, for historical reasons that are before my time. I do not know what the origins of that are. We set up a research committee that commissioned some work from the — —

The CHAIR — Are the Group of Eight also in your 38?

Dr WITHERS — Yes. There are 39 universities in Australia, and eight of those comprise the Group of Eight. We set up a committee under Professor Alan Robson to monitor, supervise and commission a research study through the Centre for Higher Education at the University of Melbourne. I believe that report has been made available to you, as has a follow-up policy-oriented document that was adopted by our board subsequently. The research paper is, as it were, the intellectual property of the centre itself, so it stands behind the interpretation and the research. Our document, which is the follow-up document, represents the use we made of that research.

We did not particularly focus on what is of special concern to you, which is geographical differences within a jurisdiction. We were looking at a more national perspective, but we did distinguish very clearly within that research a number of overlapping matters of concern to you. We certainly drew out rural and remote problems of participation and access to universities. We also looked particularly at Indigenous access issues. We also looked, within major metropolitan areas, at the access issues there for some low SES metropolitan students. It confirmed what everyone knows, which is under-participation in universities by low SES folk. It is something that has hardly changed and has now become well known by the existing measures we have, which are basically postcode measures. It has hardly changed in 15 years or more. If you assume continuity, in fact you can go back to about 1990. Some of the definitions have changed a little, but if you allow for that, there has really been little change in participation rates for low SES in universities over that period, despite ongoing focus and attention and some university policies.

The research gave some explanation for this. Essentially, it is the decision to go to university, as opposed to what goes on in universities, that is the big issue. Outcomes are not terribly different by SES background once you are admitted. So it is not as if there is an ongoing underclass issue or something like that within university processes. Once you clear the hurdle to go in and you choose to go in, your SES background does not seem to determine your academic success. There is no strong correlation there. The crucial thing seems to be the decision to go to university; that is what distinguishes lower SES. They simply choose to participate less in university. Rural and remote choose to participate even less proportionate to their numbers. So there is an additional issue for geography beyond socioeconomic status.

The Melbourne centre documented the magnitude of that difference. We saw, for instance, rural low SES for Australia as a whole at 10.6 per cent of the population, but they are only 5.9 per cent of higher education places. For urban low SES, it is 12.8 and nine per cent. So the difference is bigger. The rural socioeconomic lower SES is disproportionately low in proceeding to higher education places.

Another aspect is which aspects of higher education they choose to go into. One clear finding was that low SES chose not to go into the traditional professions, for instance, in the same way as other students — mostly young people but there are mature-age students involved in the sample as well. In the courses they choose, low SES steer away from traditional prestige professions, and they steer away from traditional prestige universities. So they are less well represented in the Group of Eight; they are less well represented in professions. The two go together in some ways, because the Group of Eight is profession-intensive in its

faculty structures compared to some of the other universities.

If you combine those three things, you find that rural and remote are under-represented in going to higher education; they are under-represented in going to the Group of Eight traditional universities, and they are under-represented even more — so compound that forward — in the professions. So there is a distinct path that is different, especially for non-metropolitan and also for metropolitan low SES.

With respect to the one thing we found in attitudinal factors explaining the difference between the rural and the others, with much of it there were common explanations for low SES rural and low SES metropolitan, but the one thing that was clearly and distinctly different was financial considerations. The rural low SES indicated that they found financial factors more of a barrier than metropolitan. So it is not just a matter of attitude, family background and dad saying, 'What in the hell do you want all that fancy pants stuff for? Get out and get a real job.' Indeed, my father said that to me; fortunately — I think — I ignored that advice. At the end of the compulsory school age, there are certain pressures that go with background that may inhibit you from going on to higher education.

The additional thing that the rural group drew much more attention to was financial factors. There is a bigger proportion of them that are concerned about that than their equivalents in the metropolitan area. I guess you can see obvious reasons: they have to move away from home, for a start. Australian students, almost uniquely among advanced industrial countries, stay at home while they study, much more than their contemporaries. American kids almost automatically move to a university away from home and are typically in residence on a campus. British and European students do that much more than we do. Maybe this is because of Australia's strong metropolitan concentration, where you can live in Melbourne or Sydney and still go to a university without having to leave home. But in countries with many more middle-size cities, people tend to move around a lot more.

Those were the findings of the research, particularly as to how they influenced, in any geographical sense, choices. We then followed up, as the board of Universities Australia, with some ways forward as to what we were going to do. One of the most important was that all of this is based upon postcode measures of socioeconomic status. We know the efficiencies of those. You can live in the worst parts of Prahran while other people are living in Toorak. I grew up in east Prahran, which at the time was not the slightest bit trendy, but Toorak was trendy then and it is now. The one postcode can encompass a whole range of diversity, so there are problems there.

As a consequence, we recommended that we move to an improved definition of socioeconomic status as a way of improving policy analysis here. We are not even sure that the sort of measures we have got of low socioeconomic status are right when they are based on postcode. It might not be 15 per cent that are, as it were, in low socioeconomic status; it could be 17, 13 or whatever. We need to research that. We recommended ways forward based on things like parental education and parental income. We have formed a technical working party with the commonwealth Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations to try and improve measures of the socioeconomic status of people going into higher education, and looking especially at matters like education and occupation, and not just postcode. We are looking at whether we need multiple indicators or whether there is a single best indicator or what the problems in eliciting this information in a reasonable and correct manner are. When people are filling out forms, they do not seem to baulk at giving a postcode; it is seen as pretty natural. You need it for the address for mailing, anyway. But do you baulk when you have to start putting down the occupation of your parents? And what does that do for mature-age students versus young school-leavers?

A postcode is problematic in its own way. For instance, a lot of students apply a postcode according to where their mailing address is, which is often student accommodation in or around a university rather than their home postcode, which is what we are really trying to ascertain, in terms of their permanent home of upbringing, if there is such a thing. If you are a services kid who moves around with mum and dad every nine months to a new military base, what is your permanent postcode? 'Care of the armed forces' or something. We have agreement from the federal education department to relook at that. As an academic enterprise, you would not be surprised to learn that that is a particular priority for us, because we want to research it better.

On the policy front, the other clear imperative for us that we have been pushing very strongly is improved

student income support arrangements, which would be particularly helpful to the rural students and to low SES in general. We have pressed very strongly for improved social welfare eligibility measures, particularly the age of independence criteria — bringing it down from 25 to 18 — and the tax status of a range of additional supports. So if we raise money for scholarships, many of those scholarships then get treated as income for the purposes of social security while some others do not. There are plainly inconsistencies there. We would like it all to move in the direction of tax exemption of scholarship support for students. We have been pushing very strongly, without much success, in the last budget. No moves were made on that. There were some good coalition policy changes on some income support measures prior to the loss of government by them. We are waiting to see what will happen with the present government, which has a strong rhetorical commitment to social inclusion measures. When it is in your ministerial designation, as it is for the Deputy Prime Minister, you should be taking it seriously. But their statements to us are that they are waiting for the outcome of the reviews to know what they should be doing by way of a comprehensive set of responses for dealing with the whole range of issues in higher education.

So that is where we have got to. We have a range of other indications as to what we think should be done in the paper we have provided to you, but that is the thrust of where, as a body, we have got ourselves to.

The CHAIR — In regard to the paper that you put to us, one of the actions was to improve university management and teaching skills for socially inclusive planning. What has been done in that area and how might that be achieved?

Dr WITHERS — It is up to individual universities. They are autonomous institutions, so they respond as they choose. So you have got a great variety of responses. That includes things like student services, which may include things like clubs, societies and associations for people of certain backgrounds, and especially how you conduct classes. It may involve whether the academic content includes relevant material to motivate students more, so that it includes geographically relevant Australian material, and material that may be seen as not necessarily exclusive of people from certain backgrounds. As is the case with school debates, do you teach English literature by using hip hop or do you teach it by using Shakespeare? Those sorts of issues come into curriculum, and there are pretty strong progressivist views among academic staff that would try and make that socially inclusive. So there are all those sorts of internal university measures.

But the biggest worry for us is that low SES students typically involve, if you are doing something about very early integration, remembering that their outcomes are not that different from those of other socioeconomic groups. The problem is getting them in, not how their progress went. Even so, there is still an attitudinal issue. If you look at attitudinal surveys, they do not feel as comfortable in the first year.

The CHAIR — Yes, that is some of the feedback we are getting: you get people from isolated communities and when they get to university some of them fit in all right but others need that extra bit of mentoring support or some sort of support to help them through.

Dr WITHERS — It does not seem to affect their progress as such, though. That is the interesting issue. It affects the quality of the learning experience, if you like, because they are less happy. If you are worried about happiness and wellbeing as opposed to some objective outcome at the end of a degree, you should be concerned about it. The big issue for us, then, is how can you make that better. For us, I am afraid the answer is, quite often, that we need more resources. What you need is, for instance, smaller classes for peer bonding to work better. If you are in a first-year law class and lucky to get tutorials of 40 students and where lecture groups are held in a cinema of 800 to 1,000 people, it is not easy if you are the one kid from Majorca in the goldfields of Victoria and you do not know anybody. There is no-one you know; you are low SES; hardly any of the kids from your primary school even went on to high school; you are the one kid that comes to university. In an environment like that, it is harder for them to feel comfortable. One way of doing that would be small class sizes.

We have now got the biggest student-staff ratio of any OECD country that we compare ourselves with. It has gone up from an average student to staff ratio of about 12 to 20 or 21 in about a decade. That is much higher than the universities we compare ourselves with in the English-speaking countries and European countries. That just makes life harder. Large groups make life harder for all students, because you are not getting quite the quality of education you should be getting because you are not getting individualised feedback, but it is

also more difficult, I think, for people from low SES backgrounds who do not have their support groups and networks in quite the same way as Melbourne Grammar kids do at Melbourne uni.

The CHAIR — The other issue I was going to ask about is that while you are saying that the research shows that it is mostly cost reasons that might prevent people coming to university — —

Dr WITHERS — Not mostly, but extra and distinctively.

The CHAIR — Okay, so my question, then, follows on: has there been some work done, some sort of research or practical activity, to address the issue of aspiration in some areas?

Dr WITHERS -- Of course there is plenty, but not by us as a collective body. Partly in that report from the Melbourne centre there is a lot of that aspirational discussion, sociological and social analysis, in terms of expressed attitudes in survey techniques. I am an economist, and I take more note of something else that comes out of the economic literature. Of course, the economic literature looks especially at financial disincentive and financial attraction, but one feature it comes up with which blends finance with aspiration is the following piece of evidence done with military personnel, which is a distinctive way of putting it.

If you have a budget of \$1 million and you are worried about attraction and retention of military personnel, how do you best construct the compensation to maximise the number of people of the right sort in the military? You do an experiment of the following kind: you offer them a choice as to how they would like their compensation packaged at the same amount to the budget. They can have it as an up-front enlistment bonus; they can have it as a pay increase; they can have it as a re-enlistment bonus, or they can have it as a pension increase further down the track.

What you typically find is that — it is mostly young men that these experiments were applied to — young men from low SES backgrounds take the up-front pay; those from the fourth and third deciles will take a pay increase over a period of enlistment; people who are already in the military or are NCOs, like sergeants, will take the re-enlistment bonus; and officers take it in a pension increase for when they retire at age 55. What that tells the economist is that the discount rate of time for young people from a low SES background is of the order of a 30 to 40 per cent discount on money now. To them, a dollar now is worth a dollar, whereas a dollar in a year's time is worth 60c. To an educated officer, a dollar in 10 years is almost the same to them as a dollar now. They look to the future in ways that people from different backgrounds do not.

Officers, by definition, are typically highly educated compared to a private enlisting in the infantry. There is something about the way in which they regard the prospects of a future career and what universities deliver — a \$400,000 to \$500,000 increase in lifetime income — compared to people who do not go on to university studies. To put it in monetary terms, that is a 15 per cent real rate of return, which is not bad compared to your bank interest rates for the money invested in you. But there are a lot of people who do not want to wait or do not look forward enough to see that they might want that in life. They want a hot sports car and binge drinking money right now to get on with enjoying life, or they want to get married early and raise kids at a young age or whatever it is. It is the here and now compared to this willingness to wait for your returns.

That could be interpreted as aspiration and the conditioning by background or whatever it is. To me, that is quite compelling as to the problem you have in inducing a group of people from low SES backgrounds to want to go into studies for three or four years that really only pay off at the end of that period. How can you change that? One way would be income support here and now, in particular — stuff that gave you more income up front. One way of doing that is government payments, but our government is not particularly generous in these matters. Our student income support is amongst the worst in OECD countries. We are absolutely miserable when it comes to what the government will pay people for living expenses while at university. As a consequence, we also have the highest work participation rates of higher education students amongst comparable countries. Our students work a lot more in paid work than any other country.

The catch is that you have to study on top of it, so, depending on your attitudes, that is a big burden on you. You have to work a lot to live well. We think it would be good to do things like having better work integration with learning whereby if you worked at McDonald's it would actually be done in ways that constructively entered your qualification processes and became a university project that was for credit transfer into your degree. You do a business degree; you are a manager in McDonald's; you do your reports on it; you have an

academic supervisor and a work supervisor who collaborate on a project that carries credit for courses in your degree so you can earn and learn at the same time.

We at Universities Australia have put forward a scheme for a national internship program. Work is naturally already part of a lot of things, like clinical placements in nursing, social work, medicine and so forth. But there are a whole range of areas where none of that exists. Your job is quite separate from your studies. If you can have a well-paying job, maybe even government subsidised in the salary so that you do not displace other workers, that might attract the sort of young people, for instance, who at present only consider TAFE because it seems of the real world and involves work. If your studies could involve more work, we think that might create a freer choice as to university versus TAFE or both.

The pathways between TAFE and unis and between unis and TAFE or VET could be better. What we have got now is a mess of federal-state fees, policies and jurisdictions. The COAG human capital agenda and the productivity agenda could actually make possible some smooth choices within tertiary or post-school education and the work elements of that. There should be the ability to take modules in VET that transfer to uni and the ability to take uni studies that transfer across to VET studies as you go through without being locked in so you do not just enrol for a degree and that is the end of the story and that if you bail after first year you do not get any credit in a VET program. Those sorts of things, we think, would make tertiary education a much more seamless and more motivating choice for low SES people than at present. That is longer term stuff. It also puts some of it back in your bailiwick, which is how VET runs together with uni education.

Mr DIXON — Just give us an outline of some of the accommodation issues for regional students. You have touched on a couple. Are there any initiatives out there where universities in Australia are tackling this and doing it well?

Dr WITHERS — Yes, I dare say it is driven as much by overseas students as by domestic student issues, given the Australian tradition of not really leaving home except for country kids. The traditional residential colleges were for rural students or for religiously oriented students or for parents who were not bothered with their students and did not want the kids at home and thought they would be better off at a college in university. Most undergrads stayed at home and commuted on buses and trains to their universities and then later used cars.

What has happened with the rise of Australian international education having the highest share of international students of any industrial country — 25 per cent of our students are international, which is the highest of any university system — is that the availability of those high-paying students as opposed to the commonwealth-supported students has made it more and more attractive. Indeed, the difficulties an international student faces are even more problematic than those of a local student. Local students do have some networks. They do know what the suburbs of Melbourne look like if they have to go and study in Melbourne.

The imperative for keeping international students happy, particularly as the dollar has been rising, has meant, I think, a relook by universities at public-private partnerships, particularly with private providers, to either manage or even finance and build accommodation. So there has been a sudden resurgence of on-campus or around-campus accommodation, particularly the around-campus accommodation — for instance, the RMIT precinct in Melbourne where you see all the international students out in the streets. They are living there. That has spill-over benefits for the local students. What that, in turn, is a response to is not just, as it were, pleasing the client; it is also because the commonwealth has not funded infrastructure properly for universities in decades. That goes back to Paul Keating. That is a bipartisan comment. Keating was the one who cut the link for proper funding of university infrastructure and university core costs, and the coalition never renewed it. The incoming Labor government has yet to renew it. That means we at universities have run down our infrastructure. Maintenance gets deferred longer and longer. We cannot raise the funds from government to build new buildings, including student accommodation.

The big change has been, a little like state governments, that we have moved to public-private partnerships. So, just like state governments did not have infrastructure funds and could not go into debt to fund infrastructure, universities have done something similar. But they have gone to debt, just as state governments have most recently gone back to debt. A number of the universities have now got themselves market ratings. They issue

bonds, and you can see why. Accommodation actually has a reliable revenue flow attached. So you can get private financiers who think you will manage your money well to lend you money for a good proposition, such as a student residence where you know there is a bunch of rent coming in.

A number of the universities have, as it were, become their own financial managers, building buildings, as well as doing it through public-private partnerships. Many like the latter because they do not think running accommodation is core business — they are about academic teaching, not running accommodation. But there is a mix of philosophies on that. Some still see it, particularly the regional campuses, as part of the whole university experience. That has been the salvation of the last five years. We were really running down accommodation arrangements, which must have been an important part of problems for rural students.

Mr DIXON — With respect to the pastoral care of the regional students finding it hard, are there good transition programs and care of isolated students coming to universities out there that you are aware of?

Dr WITHERS — Usually the on-campus facilities carry that as a connotation. They have resident tutors and communal meals and so forth. That is part of the integration process. Off-campus accommodation is commercial. But what you can have is that the way they construct these things is quite often with shared kitchens and so forth. Instead of it being the large institutionalised arrangements, it is a group of four or five people who get together. If you are not in one of those groups then you have not got an institutionalised, integrative component.

The other is, of course, home-stay stuff, where most universities run accommodation offices that will guide you to rental accommodation, including options for living with families so that you can have that as an integrating element. The thing is that, these days, it is student choice. There is a good array out there.

The decline of compulsory student unionism has also meant student services through student unions in these matters suffered significantly. That has compromised their self-help as opposed to the universities' official accommodation offices. Some of the universities have tried to make up for that substantially in their own accommodation arrangements. For example, the University of Sydney spent a lot of money making up for lost services from the student unions. Others, like Macquarie, have let it lapse and said that it is a matter for students themselves to freely choose to come together or not.

Mr KOTSIRAS — The youth allowance: is it working? We have gone to parts of Victoria where university students and parents are saying that it is not doing what it is meant to be doing. What is your view, and how can it be fixed?

Dr WITHERS — Our official policies are on the age of dependence only and the tax status of scholarships. I think the Group of Eight has a wider set of policies, including a youth allowance. We are relying upon the Henry review and the Bradley review. The Henry review is on tax and covers social security integration, and the Bradley review quite clearly in its discussion papers puts student income support strongly on the agenda for resolution of that. We do not have an official line on it.

Mr KOTSIRAS — That's a good answer worthy of a politician!

Dr WITHERS — I am a servant of my vice-chancellors.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Dr Withers. We have covered a fair bit of territory in our time. That has been pretty useful.

Dr WITHERS — I will take youth allowance on notice.

The CHAIR — Thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.

CORRECTED VERSION

EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

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

Canberra — 17 June 2008

Members

Mr M. Dixon

Mr N. Elasmir

Mr P. Hall

Dr A. Harkness

Mr S. Herbert

Mr G. Howard

Mr N. Kotsiras

Chair: Mr G. Howard

Deputy Chair: Mr N. Kotsiras

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Witnesses

Mr T. Beckett, registrar, ANU Student Services.

The CHAIR — Tim, thank you for coming along and speaking to us in regard to ANU Student Services. You are aware of what our inquiry covers in terms of trying to support students from isolated or regional communities or even low socioeconomic backgrounds to attend tertiary institutions. We are happy to have the information that you can share relevant to that. Then we will have some questions to follow up on.

Mr BECKETT — Thank you. I suppose I should start by setting out what the situation here in Canberra is. We are faced in Canberra at the moment with an, at best, static but probably slightly declining year 12 demographic. The Canberra education system allows students in the secondary colleges to take either a tertiary entry package or a technical entry package. It is up to the students to decide which one they want. There has also been a slight decline — and I have no explanation for it — in students taking up the tertiary entrance package. In effect, the numbers of students who will be applying for tertiary entrance in Canberra has been declining slightly over the last couple of years.

As a result of that, of course, in order to meet our education funding obligations, the university has been forced fairly strongly to look outside the ACT in order to continue to make up our numbers. Over the last five to six years we have had a fairly concerted push to market in the metro areas, particularly in Sydney and in metro Melbourne. We also do an awful lot of work in western New South Wales, again looking to students as far out as Bourke and Dubbo, Bathurst and down towards the border towards Albury. The idea is that the students from those areas are almost certainly going to leave home to go to universities, so they might as well go to the ANU as anywhere else. That is the basis behind it.

Just to give you some idea, in 2002 our ACT student populations would have represented 70 per cent of our student body. Now, in 2006, it is 64 per cent of our student body and by 2009 we are expecting that out-of-state students will represent close to 40 per cent of our student body. For us it is a major issue. However, in many ways it also works towards our position as a national university that we are able to take students in from around the country. At 40 per cent interstate, that is probably the highest proportion of non-resident students of any institution in the country.

So what do we do to do that? We actually have, as you are probably aware, our own building in Collins Street which we use quite strongly to promote our business down in Melbourne, and we have appointed a roving ambassador for the university who actually gets in to all of the relevant high schools and metro schools and works out of that building. That person is appointed for six months a year during the peak student recruitment programs, ending up with open day at the end of August or towards the middle of September.

The idea is to get out there and start talking to Victorian students about the benefits of the ANU and the benefits of ANU education. That has worked quite strongly and, in fact, our Victorian numbers have grown since 2002 from 3.7 per cent to 5.7 per cent in 2006. So it is quite a reasonable growth. We have a similar position in Sydney, although the Sydney numbers are showing not quite the same growth as Victorian numbers, for a number of reasons, the least of which is that there are 14 university colleges and campuses in the Sydney region alone, which makes a big difference.

Amongst the other things that we do is to bring students up for open day. We have information evenings down in Melbourne. We invite people to come in. We had one last night. We have 100 groups through looking at the ANU and what we have to offer. So it is a major push for us.

Mr KOTSIRAS — You mentioned your open day. You are talking about in Melbourne?

Mr BECKETT — In Melbourne.

Mr KOTSIRAS — You do not bring them up here?

Mr BECKETT — We bring them up here as well.

Mr KOTSIRAS — You pay for it?

Mr BECKETT — We pay for them.

Dr HARKNESS — So last night you took them into the Collins Street office?

Mr BECKETT — No. We actually went into the Hilton because there were too many for the Collins Street office. That is a major focus for us. We have got to do that. We also bring in key careers advisers from schools and bring them into open day. We actually pay for them to come to open day and work with us and see what the university has to offer in our open day program. So it is a continual process.

Apart from these open evenings, if you like, rather than open day in Melbourne, which we run usually every couple of months, we are also at all the various fairs, student fairs around Melbourne, trying to attract students. So what do we do once we get hold of them and get their interest? We have a number of things that we try to do for them when they arrive.

First of all, we actually have a pre-departure briefing for the parents and for the kids themselves before the beginning of term, so we bring them in, answer questions and just make them comfortable. We also have a policy in the university where we will guarantee university approved accommodation to any student coming from outside the ACT region, provided they apply for it. We currently have about 3,500 beds on campus. We will be opening another 500 beds at the end of this year for next year, and so far we have been able to meet our commitment. Not every student gets to live on campus, but all students can get guaranteed accommodation.

Dr HARKNESS — And that is dorm-style accommodation?

Mr BECKETT — It could be dorm-style accommodation. When we run out of dorm-style accommodation we would then be looking to put them into shared housing and so on off campus, but it would be university approved share housing. We do the same for international students. As a result of that, we have about 33 per cent of our students living on campus, which is probably one of the highest proportions in the country.

Dr HARKNESS — Do you subsidise it? Do you make a profit or do you break even?

Mr BECKETT — We make a slight profit.

Dr HARKNESS — And do all kids pay the same or does it depend where they come from? Some are subsidised or do they all pay the same?

Mr BECKETT — No. They all pay the same.

The CHAIR — So what is the cost?

Mr BECKETT — It would be about \$150 for accommodation where they are doing their own cooking, through to about \$260 or so for fully catered accommodation.

Dr HARKNESS — That is a week, is it?

Mr BECKETT — That is a week, which again, compared to metro costs, is actually quite inexpensive. The difficulty that we have, as you are probably aware, is that the Canberra housing market is exceedingly tight. It has a less than two per cent vacancy rate and it is very difficult to get kids into that. So what we do, in fact, is to do bond guarantees so that if the students are in a shared house the university will guarantee the bond so that if they march the lessors are not out of pocket, as it were. I am pleased to say that very few of our students default.

As far as housing is concerned, we then go on to other things. Orientation programs are exceedingly important for students. In fact, particularly for international students we have actually done a little study which shows that if you do not go to orientation you are probably going to have more difficulty than if you do. So we are very keen to do that. We have a buddy program called the student information and guidance network where students are placed, on a voluntary basis, with senior students in the university to help them to get around the process. Then we have the full range of normal student services — health service, counselling service, careers and so on.

One of our strong areas is in academic skills and learning, which provides additional assistance to students in such things as taking effective lecture notes, how to write academic essays and so on. So it is a fairly broad-based approach.

We have a very strong student association on campus. They get listened to. They have almost immediate right of access to the Vice-Chancellor. They have immediate right of access to me, so that if there are any issues we can deal with them before they become major problems. They are very proactive, our student association, and they certainly let you know if they are displeased. It is absolutely wonderful working with them. They are a very bright bunch of kids and we are pleased with that.

The CHAIR — Can I ask you about the buddy system that you have? It is a voluntary one?

Mr BECKETT — Yes.

The CHAIR — So new students working with third years?

Mr BECKETT — Second or third years.

The CHAIR — And they volunteer?

Mr BECKETT — They volunteer. We put out a volunteer program for them. We usually have no shortage of volunteers and then we run them through a formal training program where they get communication skills, counselling skills, training and so on so that they actually have semi full-on training on mentoring, and that works very well indeed.

The CHAIR — Is that just for orientation week and then as things might happen after that or is it suggested that it is a particular period of time?

Mr BECKETT — It is up to three months after the beginning of the semester. Individual mentors may maintain their contacts for much longer than that. In some cases the kids come in, spend a week with the mentor, decide, 'Right, that's it, I know where I am', and push off after that. One of the joys of being a small institution—we laughingly say that we are big enough to be interesting and small enough to be friendly—is that we can actually get to talk to most of our students on campus and get to know student leaders, which is a very useful thing.

The CHAIR — Do many students work part time?

Mr BECKETT — About 70 per cent of our students have at least one part-time job.

The CHAIR — Is there a tight job market for part-time students?

Mr BECKETT — The unemployment rate in Canberra is less than two per cent. Most of our students have very little difficulty getting jobs. Whether it is working as a barista or stacking supermarket shelves is neither here nor there. They have very little problem getting jobs. It is an interesting demographic here in the ACT. One of the problems that we have always is filling our socioeconomic and regional and rural targets. Nowhere in the ACT is listed as low SES. The question is then: do you bring low SES in from the rural areas and would you therefore be disadvantaging them even further by bringing them in here where they are going to have to pay in the metro area? It is something that we are trying to address quite strongly in terms of where we are. It is a particular issue for the ACT.

One of the other interesting aspects of that is that we have the highest first-year deferral rate — students taking a gap year — in the country. It is 21 per cent at the ANU. That is because parents can afford to send their kids to the UK for a year, and do.

Mr KOTSIRAS — How many of those come back?

Mr BECKETT — We get about 75 per cent return.

Mr DIXON — You said that you target students in Melbourne and Sydney. Do you also do similar information evenings in regional centres? Do you go to Ballarat — —

Mr BECKETT — We usually go to the education fairs, rather than have the evenings, as such. We would be sending somebody to the Ballarat tertiary fair and they would sit there and talk to kids as they pass. That is fairly standard operating practice for most Australian universities. We do Victoria. We also go as far afield as South Australia, Western Australia and up to northern New South Wales and into Queensland, which is probably something that Victorian universities do not have to do, but we do in order to maintain our numbers.

Mr KOTSIRAS — As part of that program in Melbourne you said you have one ambassador who goes around to schools. Is one of the aims also to lift the aspirations of students or parents?

Mr BECKETT — A bit of everything. It is educative, so the idea is that they can get in and talk to the careers advisers and subject teachers just to raise information and educate them about what the ANU has. With the careers evenings then we usually bring down not just the ambassador. We actually bring down staff from the teaching faculty so that they can get in and they can actually ask the professor of physics, ‘What do I do in physics?’ This is the program. It is, if you like, ‘This is what the ANU has to offer. This is the sort of programs that we can do. These are the sorts of admission requirements that we need. Why don’t you come to our evening on such and such a date and find out more from everybody?’ That is the process that we work. The University of Melbourne, by the way, do exactly the same thing in the ACT, but I do not think they get very many.

Mr DIXON — Sure. Do you see any value in the university getting into primary schools and talking to students or having a presence in primary schools in the area?

Mr BECKETT — Not really. Primary school is far too early. What we are looking at at the moment is talking to students at the end of year 10. The reason is that they move into the VCE, HSC, or the senior college here in the ACT, which is the last two years. They then have to start choosing the subjects that they will need in terms of the score for a particular program. A lot of them have prerequisites; not all of them have prerequisites, but the students have to decide. If they are going to become a physicist or do engineering, they are going to have to do maths and physics. What we try to do is get them in at that selection process. Any earlier—forget it. Then we try to bring them in again during year 11 and then again for open day in year 12 so that we can reinforce their subject choice and also tell them what they need to do in case they need to change at that stage.

We maintain a very flexible degree structure here, so if somebody comes in and suddenly decides, “Damn it; this is not what I want to be doing”, we allow them an internal transfer within the university so that they can change their degree program relatively simply. We have, however, roughly 60 per cent of our students doing combined degrees, which again is one of the highest proportions in the country, so in many cases they can meet their aspirations and their interests at the same time by taking a combined program. We can combine nearly 100 different possibilities, including a wonderful one of visual arts and forestry, so presumably you paint the tree and then you cut it down.

The CHAIR — I am interested to know too whether you have had discussions with the TAFE sector here in the ACT and whether there are some developments in terms of articulation from TAFE through.

Mr BECKETT — We work quite closely with CIT, the Canberra Institute of Technology, just across the road, and we have three associate degree programs that we run with them, in science, engineering, and music of all things. The idea is that they spend two years in the CIT, at the same time taking ANU advanced subjects, and they come out with an associate degree and then articulate directly through into our degree programs. On the other hand, if they do not want to articulate them, they can walk out with an associate degree, which is an AQF recognised qualification. ANU College also runs the same programs for us in business and the humanities and science.

The CHAIR — What other programs do ANU College run?

Mr BECKETT — ANU College, as distinct from ANU secondary college — ANU secondary college is the link-up we have with the ACT Department of Education and Training, which provides advanced secondary subjects — provides a foundation program for international students. It provides access English programs. If a student is, say, half an IELTS point below our requirement, if they are an international student they can come in and do a special intensive English program and move on from there. It provides also our concurrent English language program, which is a full credit English program, particularly for international students but for any students of language other than English background, which they can take to count for credit in their degree program. Those are the major areas that it works in.

The CHAIR — I was going to ask you about dropout rates, whether you have done studies of your dropout rates and whether any groups have been identified as more likely to drop out. In other words, are the ones living away from home more likely to drop out or is there no evidence to suggest anything—

Mr BECKETT — We have done the studies but I am afraid I do not have the data just at the top of my mind at the moment. There is no indication that interstate students are any more likely to fail or drop out than anybody else. The usual explanation for dropout is more a life-employment balance, education-employment balance, so that they may find themselves having to work more than anything else. But just off the top of my head I do not think our dropout rates are any different from Melbourne, Monash or any of the other Group of Eight institutions.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Tim.

Witness withdrew.

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Canberra — 17 June 2008

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Witnesses

Ms J. Rizvi, ANUSA president,

Ms M. Firth, ANUSA vice president,

Ms K. Lam, student relocated from Victoria, and

Ms K. Ottrey, student relocated from Victoria, ANU Students' Association.

The CHAIR — We now welcome representatives of the Australian National University Students Association. We are pleased to have you here. We have had other representatives from ANU speak to us today to give us a bit of background on ANU, but we are particularly interested to get the perspectives of students, and we are particularly looking at issues of participation in tertiary education by students from regions or from low socioeconomic backgrounds and how that is being addressed. We look forward to your overall contribution to tell us about ANU and the sorts of services you provide. I do not know who is going to speak first. Do you have any plans?

Ms RIZVI — We will let you know who we are. I am Jamila and I am president of the ANU Students Association, and Madeleine is the vice-president. Kate and Kacey are both student representatives who have relocated from Victoria and both of them are living on campus, so we thought that might give a good impression of what it is like when you relocate, because most students from Victoria do live on campus. What would you like to know and we will talk?

The CHAIR — Perhaps you would like to talk about the services that the students association provides, particularly for new students but more broadly the support you are able to provide and your observations of how students who have relocated to Canberra have gone and so on.

Ms RIZVI — The students association provides two main functions at the ANU. Following the introduction of voluntary student unionism, we are fully funded by the university and then we bring in some funding from elsewhere, so we are quite competent and we are able to fulfil the duties we used to prior to the voluntary student unionism legislation.

There are two main aspects of what we do. The social aspect necessarily relates to the students as well in terms of their relocation and their welfare because the social part of university is the major part. One of the things we are always saying is that you do not just learn in lectures, you do not just learn in the library; you also learn on the lawns, you learn in the bar and you learn in your residence. These guys are literally living 24 hours a day at the university, so it is not just a place of study; it is a home as well. The students association provides a lot of social support, through orientation week and through clubs and societies. Almost every student on the campus is involved in at least one club or society; these girls and a lot of the others are involved in four or five, if not more. So we run basically all of the social atmosphere for the ANU, for the undergraduate population.

Then, on top of that, we provide a welfare service—academic advocacy, legal advocacy. We employ a lawyer and a counsellor. The counsellor, particularly, is often involved with students from interstate or overseas, especially with the challenges I suppose they face when they first move here. If you are 17 or 18 and have never used a washing machine before, moving to Canberra can be quite daunting and there is a lot that goes with it.

We also provide some financial support for students in the form of long-term loans with very low interest rates. We are also looking at the moment at setting up a textbook loan scheme. We are finding that a lot of students, particularly from interstate, who have less support from their parents are not paying for textbooks up-front. They could afford it over the semester but they cannot afford the big \$600 bill at the start of the semester. We have also just set up a new fund that provides emergency grocery vouchers, which we are finding students living on campus, which tend to be students from interstate, are using far more than the students who live in Canberra.

That is a quick overview.

Mr KOTSIRAS — So if I were to come from regional Victoria, having just left home for the first time in my life, to the university, how do I get assistance in terms of finding accommodation, making friends and being made to feel part of the university? What does the university do to make me feel part of the university?

Ms RIZVI — I think the easiest thing for students who first come is if they are in touch with the university accommodation service at ANU, which is generally quite good. For all first-year undergraduates relocating from interstate, the ANU offers a guarantee that they will be found accommodation by the ANU. Mostly they live on campus. It is probably better for one of these girls to tell you what it is like to first move

in.

Ms OTTREY — I am from Ballarat.

The CHAIR — Very good; so am I.

Mr DIXON — Kacey, where are you from?

Ms LAM — I am from Melbourne.

Mr DIXON — Which part of Melbourne?

Ms LAM — Kooyong.

The CHAIR — Good.

Ms OTTREY — I am from Victoria. I am doing law. It was never an opportunity for me to stay in Ballarat because it is not offered at the university there. I was always going to have relocate, be it to Melbourne, Sydney or Canberra. They were the areas I was looking at.

For me, getting a place in a hall or college was the most important thing. If I did not have a place at ANU, I was going to go to Melbourne uni instead; it was that important. It is really stressed at school, I find, in the regional areas that that is the way to make friends. That has been my experience and that of older students whom I knew and who had gone off to universities, wherever they went. From our school, a lot of people go to Melbourne uni. If they did not get a place in a college, they found it really difficult to make friends. They found that they were quite isolated because they did not have the body of school friends at that university. For example, if you live in Canberra and you go to ANU, you would have friends.

The halls and colleges provide the social structure, to begin with, and provide the support. They take on, in some senses, a lot of the counselling of students and looking after the welfare because they have systems in them to look after students. It is particularly important in the first year. They also provide academic help. That is really important in the first year. A lot of people move out after that because they have made friends.

Dr HARKNESS — In terms of your accommodation, Kate, you are in a particular hall of residence?

Ms OTTREY — I am at Bergmann College. We have 240 undergraduates and 120 postgraduates. It is a catered college. We are paying \$285 or \$290 a week at the moment. It is a 40-week contract. It is the most expensive college at the ANU. Luckily, they are not any more expensive than that.

Dr HARKNESS — What do you get extra that the others do not get?

Ms OTTREY — You don't. We have a debt. There is not actually much difference. I do not think there is any difference. Some of them have different prices.

Dr HARKNESS — Do you have a part-time job?

Ms OTTREY — No, I don't. I am in the fortunate position where I have a scholarship. That said, if I was not being quite heavily supported by my parents, there would be no way that I could be living off a scholarship.

Dr HARKNESS — Who is the scholarship with?

Ms OTTREY — It is with the ANU. I was in the very fortunate position at the end of year 12 where I could choose to go to Melbourne uni, Monash or ANU. I had scholarship offers from all of the universities. In that sense, it was a better decision economically to go to Melbourne, just in terms of the relocation costs are a lot higher if you move further away from home. Travelling home to visit parents is really expensive. Also, the scholarship offers, for Victorian students, are better at Victorian universities. Once you move interstate, there

are fewer scholarships for Victorians. Because my parents are able to support me, they said, 'Go wherever you want to go'.

Mr KOTSIRAS — What was the reason you moved here?

Ms OTTREY — Because I wanted to do international relations and international law. I thought it was best at ANU.

Mr KOTSIRAS — What about you, Kacey?

Ms LAM — I live at John XXIII College. It is actually the cheapest catered college on the campus. It is down the scale, I guess. I did not move there originally. I moved to Fenner Hall when I first arrived. That is a self-catering hall and is about 20 minutes away from the university. But I did not know that before I came up. I moved. The first day was actually very daunting because I realised I had never cooked for myself. I didn't have pots and pans; I didn't know where the grocery shops were. The SRs, the senior residents, are there for you, except there were about 20 new students; so it is difficult to get the whole one-on-one thing.

I actually ended up moving out after six months to John XXIII College. Apparently they rarely transfer mid term, especially now with the accommodation crisis. I guess my living at John XXIII has been made easier because of all the support they give you. You have academic mentors; you have senior residents; the common room is there for you; they feed you; you can participate in sport and art; and there are lots of social events. That has made that a lot easier.

I guess I moved to ANU because I did not have a choice. It was either I moved to ANU or I would get into Deakin. I could have done sports management at Deakin, but I currently do a bachelor of commerce in arts at ANU. It was pretty much that ANU was the better choice. Travelling to Deakin from where I lived would have taken me 45 minutes to an hour by tram every day, whilst now I can walk 10 minutes to classes. There was that whole, big lifestyle change. I took the jump and took the opportunity to come to Canberra, I guess.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Do you have a part-time job?

Ms LAM — I do. I have about three. I work at Myer. That is easy because, if I ever want to move back to Melbourne, I can transfer my job with me. I work for the university as well, in recruitment. I also have a night job.

In terms of support, my parents pay for my accommodation, which definitely has helped. If they didn't, I couldn't live in self-catered accommodation because I would not be able to afford it. It is \$260 a week. My parents pay up-front. That is with a discount.

Mr KOTSIRAS — That is \$260 a week over how many weeks? How many weeks do you get charged for?

Ms LAM — It is 40 weeks as well. It is pretty much from mid February to the end of exams in November.

Mr KOTSIRAS — It includes food?

Ms LAM — It includes food, yes, thank God.

Mr ELASMAR — Are there any other students from your area that wanted to come here but could not come, for a different reason?

Ms LAM — A lot of it is the mental barrier of moving to Canberra, I guess. If it is Melbourne or Canberra, a lot of them go, 'No, I don't want to go to Canberra'. There is nothing stopping you. If there is nothing like that, then there pretty much aren't any limits, except costs. I was at the advisory day. I work for ANU recruitment. I was in Melbourne on the weekend and all the kids from Melbourne schools were coming up to see what courses there are at the ANU. One kid in particular could not move up unless he got a scholarship because his parents said, 'We can't afford for you to move up'. We have to highlight all the

different benefits and tell them to make the application and put it in.

Ms RIZVI — We find that the majority of students from interstate would not be here without their parents paying for their accommodation. They usually have a part-time job to pay for everything else. The parents usually pay about \$10,000 for the year for accommodation.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Is this the first time that you two have moved out of home?

Ms LAM — Yes.

Ms OTTREY — Yes.

Mr KOTSIRAS — How did you feel in the first month or so?

Ms LAM — I wanted to go home, to be honest. After the first week, I was on the phone to my mum, ‘I want to come back. I don’t care if I transfer to another university’. But then it grows on you. You realise you have people around you in the same position; you have more support; you realise the support is there. That makes it a lot easier

Ms OTTREY — I was really homesick at the start and massively questioning my decision to come to Canberra. I considered transferring back to Melbourne uni or Monash University, even at the end of first year, just to be closer to home because it would be easier as well. By that time, you have made friends. If you can last the first bit, then you are okay.

Ms RIVZI — You take the opportunity to join the clubs and societies; you keep yourself busy so that you do not think about it. That is one thing I did not do when I first arrived.

Mr DIXON — Madeleine, where do you come from?

Ms FIRTH — I am from Canberra.

Dr HARKNESS — Did any of your friends end up at the ANU?

Ms FIRTH — About half and half; about half of my friends went interstate and about half stayed. The biggest deciding factor was finance as to whether their parents would support them to go interstate. A lot of people from rural areas, who maybe did not have a university in their immediate location, come and speak to the students association. They did not have a choice as to whether they could stay at home to study; they had to move. Because they moved straightaway, they do not have that support from their parents. It makes it really difficult. You have to wait for 18 months from year 12 before you can get youth allowance or rent assistance from the government.

A lot of issues with people moving interstate are: if they do not have that support from their parents for the first 18 months, they have to support themselves fully. They also have to be working enough so that, in 18 months, they can get youth allowance and rent assistance. The financial issue is really huge unless you have got a scholarship or support from your parents.

Dr HARKNESS — Do you live at home?

Ms FIRTH — I just moved out of my home about three months ago, but I did live at home in Canberra before that.

Dr HARKNESS — Is there good public transport to the campus?

Ms FIRTH — No. That is the reason I moved out of home, essentially. It only takes me 15 minutes to drive to uni, 20 minutes in peak hour; if it is quiet I can get there in almost 10 minutes. Coming in by bus is okay because I know the times, but going home by bus could take up to an hour and a half, especially at night. After about 5 o’clock, the buses run only once an hour. This year, because I was doing so much more work with the students association, I was here quite late at night, three or four nights a week after 9.00. There was

not any transport. I decided to move. My parents are still supporting me a little. That made it easier.

Rental accommodation in Canberra is really difficult to find and really expensive. I wanted to move to be within walking distance of the uni. That is in the city, which is the hardest area to find any accommodation in. It took probably three months to find a share house. I was looking with three other people. I pay \$145 a week.

Dr HARKNESS — That is a quarter of the rent?

Ms FIRTH — Not quite; one boy pays a little more because he has an en suite. We pay \$580 a week for an old four-bedroom house. It is within walking distance of the uni. We were really lucky to find it. It took three months.

Ms RIZVI — The on-campus accommodation sounds expensive but it is not when you compare it to what is available off campus. I live 500 metres from the campus, as close as any of the residences are, in a one-bedroom apartment. We pay \$395 a week. Compared to a one-bedroom room, that is \$260 with food, living on campus is not actually that bad at all. It just sounds bad.

Mr KOTSIRAS — What recommendation would you make for new students coming in? What part would you change? How would you make it easier for new students from interstate to come and live in Canberra or at the university?

Ms FIRTH — The way youth allowance currently works. I know it is a federal government issue, not a state government issue. Firstly, there is the way students become eligible; and, secondly, how much is paid. It still falls below the Henderson poverty line, which means that it is very difficult for students to come if they do not have support from their families. One of the things I said before is that almost every student we meet who lives on campus says, 'I've got support from mum and dad'. If they do not have that support, they are just not there; they are not living on campus; they have stayed at home. They might not even have gone to university if they had wanted to.

Firstly, there is the way youth allowance is calculated. For example, when I first moved out of home I was not eligible; I spent 18 months struggling to work up enough money to become eligible. By the time I was eligible I was okay. I spent a year and a half getting ready. I think a lot of students find that the money is not there when you are actually struggling in the first year and a half.

Secondly, the amount you get is not very much and certainly is not enough to live on. Students are required to work. I think that is probably the biggest barrier for students transferring.

Ms RIZVI — It makes it a lot easier if students actually take a year off before going to university and work, whether it be overseas or in Australia. It works out to be more than a year because you finish school in about November and start university in about March; you have made that money so that you can then start getting it when you need it. If a student comes straight from year 12, without the support of their parents, and they are moving interstate, that is the hardest thing. That is where you see the highest levels of poverty amongst students. They are students have come from rural areas and were forced to come. They did not make a choice; they had no other university near to them; and they do not have the support of their parents. That is where the highest levels of poverty are.

Mr KOTSIRAS — The danger there is that, if you take a gap year, you might not come back?

Ms FIRTH — Exactly.

Ms OTTREY — The other issue is that, if you get offered a scholarship, you cannot defer it. You get into this position where you say, 'If I accept this scholarship, even though it is the top scholarship offered by this university, I still cannot afford to go to uni. I have to say no to it; work to get the money to go to university; then apply and maybe get offered that scholarship or maybe not the next year'. You get into this situation where the scholarships do not match the government policy for getting youth allowance.

Mr KOTSIRAS — If you did get youth allowance, then the scholarship is discounted?

Ms OTTREY — Just moving interstate, particularly in the first year which is when you are not getting that youth allowance, the costs are huge. I get a lot of money from my parents. There were so many unforeseen costs with travelling. I do not get student concession when I am back in Victoria. I still live in Victoria for almost four months of the year. I live in Ballarat. I could be getting the train to Melbourne once a week. You pay adult prices on everything. The costs have skyrocketed. You should be getting the discount more than anyone else because you are paying so much to be in Canberra.

Ms FIRTH — That is a huge issue for ACT students. If you are a student from Yass, you get student concession rates in New South Wales but nowhere else in the country.

Ms OTTREY — The costs are so high that they cancel out a concession, even if you pay to get one.

Ms FIRTH — It is just so silly. On one side of the border, you are a student; on the other, you are an adult.

Ms OTTREY — It is such an issue. If you are travelling long distances, all of a sudden it does make a huge difference to getting home on the trains and buses and everything. We have written to politicians at all levels about it. Everyone says it is someone else's problem.

The CHAIR — How do you get from here to Ballarat?

Ms OTTREY — Last year I did a mixture of flying, driving and getting the train because last year the flights were a lot more expensive. If I take the train, it takes 10 to 12 hours before I am home. It is not a very nice day. It is not all that expensive. I think it is \$50 or \$60.

Mr DIXON — Which way does the train go?

Ms OTTREY — We get a bus to Cootamundra, a train to Melbourne and then a train from Melbourne to Ballarat. They don't always match up nicely. The Melbourne-Sydney train is never on time; that is a separate issue. This year I have been flying more because with Tiger Airways sometimes you can get flights for \$30, and the planes are just full of students. It is actually a plane of ANU students going there and back; you can recognise 10 people on the plane. So that has been really useful.

The CHAIR — Have any of you done any form of online coursework in your studies?

Ms RIZVI — The ANU does not offer that sort of external learning. They offer an element of flexible learning, in that they record lectures and they are available online. For example, because I work at the students association full time, I do not go to my lectures, but you can listen to them online. But the ANU does not offer external education.

The CHAIR — But you have used the online — —

Ms RIZVI — Yes. It is one of the things students come to us about a lot. One of their big complaints is: 'My lecturer is 95 and refuses to use the technology to tape his lectures'. Students work, and they do not necessarily have time to go to the lecture or the tutorial.

Ms FIRTH — Working is the biggest issue. Students are always having to miss lectures for work. If they are not recorded, it is just so difficult. The ANU are really getting there. Certainly, they have committed a lot of funds to increasing their flexible learning infrastructure in the next year, but the actual problem is getting lecturers to do it.

The CHAIR — So the university has not made it — —

Ms FIRTH — No, it is not mandated.

Ms OTTREY — It is not required generally.

Ms FIRTH — It is up to the lecturer. Some people just do not want to engage in the technology.

There are a few lecturers who still record on a cassette; there is one cassette of a lecture and you have to go to the library and borrow it, along with a recorder, and listen to it in the library.

The CHAIR — Perhaps some are worried that if they put it on tape nobody will come to their lectures!

Ms FIRTH — That is another big issue: they really worry that all of a sudden students will stop coming. But we really find that is not the case. In lectures that are already recorded, students still come, but it is just that sometimes they can't come. For example, since the second semester of first year, I have had a lecture clash in every single semester. This semester, I have a lecture clash between two compulsory courses for my same major. It is within the same faculty of the same college, and there is a clash, and only one of them is recorded. It happens all the time. What was I supposed to do? I could not postpone either of them because I would not get my major. I had to do both courses, so there is one lecture this semester that I have just never been to. Because it is fully recorded, that is okay. But if it had not been recorded, it would have added a semester onto my degree.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much. You have given us some very helpful information.

Witnesses withdrew.

CORRECTED VERSION

EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

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

Canberra — 17 June 2008

Members

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Witnesses

Ms G. London, academic director, University of Canberra.

The CHAIR — Thank you for coming along to give us some of your time. You understand that we are inquiring into issues of participation in tertiary education and variations of participation. We are interested in learning about the University of Canberra College and what you do there. Would you like to make some remarks and then we will probably have some follow-up questions.

Ms LONDON — I did bring along some brochures. It sometimes helps, when you are talking about things. The University of Canberra College is just over 10 years old. We started in December 1997. We are a private company of the University of Canberra. Our mission was always to provide pathway programs for students who wanted to come to university. Ninety-eight per cent of our work is in that area. Initially, it was set up to facilitate entry for international students, but over time our Australian student numbers far outnumbered the international student numbers. So we have very much evolved over time.

The first area that we picked up in terms of Australian student pathways was the traditional mature-age entry. Typically, we would see, depending on economics and entry scores to university, somewhere between 250 and 350 students a year through the mature-age entry program. It is called UC Prep in that brochure. Following on from that, we started to establish school-leaver programs. They have been very successful. We have one called UC Connect which is for up to age 20 but really we would describe it as for recent school-leavers.

The bulk of the students who would enter that program in February would have just left year 12. Their key factor is that they did not score a high enough UAI to go to university or they did not get a university entrance rank at all because of whatever programs they were studying. It is a unique factor of the ACT education system that roughly 40 per cent of students in ACT senior colleges are not aiming for a tertiary package. We do pick up quite a number of students that have initially enrolled in VET packages in year 11 and 12 who then change their mind. So they come through that pathway as well.

For many years we have also run a non-award program called UC Start. It is very popular, despite the fee that comes with it. You will see in the brochure that there is quite a hefty charge. It far outstrips the other programs in terms of popularity. That is because it is non-award. They do two subjects from a degree. So they let us know what degree they are going to do and we say, because we have already done all the work with the degree convenors, 'You will do these two subjects'. Their results from those two subjects at the end of a semester are converted to a GPA, which is then converted to an entrance rank for them. Somewhere between 85 and 89 per cent of the students in that program qualify for university, so it is quite successful, in terms of success rates and also in terms of ongoing success, once they are on campus.

That program is starting to fade into the background because the entrance ranks for the University of Canberra, as with a lot of universities, is falling, and the students that would have traditionally gone through that program are making direct entry these days. But back when UC's entry rank was 75, we would have 300 students in UC Start alone. Students who aspire to go to university are very willing to enrol in pathway programs.

There is an additional program that we are now running, which is not in the brochure because it is a partnership approach we have got with the ACT senior colleges. We have embedded a version of UC Connect into year 12 for non-UAI students so that they can be studying at UC and qualifying to go to uni at the same time as they are completing their ACT year 12 certificate.

The CHAIR — In other words, they do one or two university subjects as part of their year 12?

Ms LONDON — No, it is actually a bridging level; it is not a university subject. They are doing bridging-type units. But at the end of it they get a score which the university can assess them on. So that is a more recent program that is just moving out of the pilot stage into a fully-fledged stage. We do restrict that to 40 students a year, but we fill the places. You have to keep in mind that there are just over 2,000 students in year 12 who will not get a UAI, so it is quite a big pool to be pulling from. It is unique to this system.

The other progression that has happened is that the university re-accredited our UC Connect and UC Prep courses. You can see in the documentation that it fits under the commonwealth description of an enabling course. So we work towards students who meet equity criteria becoming commonwealth supported in those programs, as an enabling student. They are free, basically. We are moving away from the fact that we always

charge fees for every course to trying to improve the university's equity profiles. Another feature of the ACT is that we do not have any postcodes that fit into low socioeconomic groups. So it is very hard for the University of Canberra to meet targets for access and equity.

The CHAIR — All your students would be from the ACT?

Ms LONDON — No. We draw from the region — what is loosely termed as the capital region. That would extend down to the border, across to the coast and approaching Wagga and places like that. So the university does draw from those areas, although it is very competitive because every other university is marketing across there. We do get quite a number of students that come into these programs from what is called our region. Typically, in a UC Start profile, last year we had about 80 or 90 students. About 30 came from the region. So it does attract them. They prefer UC Start to the other one because it gives them a feeling that they are actually getting going in their education because they are doing two units.

Mr KOTSIRAS — How many of the students who undertake your program go on to a degree in university, and how many of your kids complete a degree?

Ms LONDON — The completion rate. Tracking back to the mature age program, it has a typical profile of about a 40 per cent dropout rate. That is fairly typical for an enabling course. It is not what we would like to get — —

Mr KOTSIRAS — They drop out before they complete your course?

Ms LONDON — Yes, they drop out before they complete. We have always run UC prep, because it is for mature age, in a very laid-back way, so there is no marking and chasing of students or anything like that. It has that low completion rate. Of those that complete, it is between 95 to 100 per cent that will go on to university. Mature age students within that profile, I think we have about a 77 per cent retention rate at UC.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Why do they drop out?

Ms LONDON — When we started the program 10 years ago, the typical person enrolled in a UC prep course was a woman in her 40s, finished raising the kids and now it was her turn. As the average age for mature age students has fallen to about 26, so there has been a dramatic drop in the average age of mature age students. There is a bit better gender balance than we used to have. But we find they have a higher dropout rate because these people have got very heavy work commitments and family commitments. So they find it difficult to maintain full study loads. It parallels also the fact that at the university the average study load is falling from four units to three units a semester on average. It is fitting with that pattern.

With the UC Connect students, it varies from year to year, but the completion rate has been 85 per cent or better. So there is not the same dropout rate. The completion rate of degrees is the university average. So it is about 83 per cent, something like that. UC Start, we might lose one student. There is hardly any dropout rate. I always say—this is just anecdotal; it is not grounded on anything—that it is the fee. You pay all that money; it is not free; you are committed. If you are not committed, your parents are because they pay the fee for you. So we tend to find a very low dropout rate from UC Start. The progress rate to university is around about 90 per cent, and the dropout rate from uni is the same; it is about 83 per cent retention.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Do you know of any other schools in other states or overseas that offer similar programs to yours?

Ms LONDON — I think the biggest and the one with the longest history in New South Wales is Newcastle uni. I have to try and remember the name. They have a foundation studies type program, which is a year-long program. It is an enabling course, so it is free to the students if you meet equity criteria. I think they actually contribute something like 40 per cent of entry to Newcastle uni. It has been running 20 years and has an excellent reputation. It is certainly worth looking at.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Overseas?

Ms LONDON — Not that I am aware of. The courses we have tend to be unique because of where

most of our students come from, which is the ACT. There have been a number of colleges, like Wollongong University College and SWIC, which is the Sydney Western International College, who take Australian students, but they tend to put them through diploma programs rather than pure bridging programs, which ours have tended to be. So the student does a diploma first, which is the equivalent to first year, and then accesses the second year of the uni.

Those models vary from being full fee to subsidised. They are quite expensive. The other one that does it is SBIT, as it used to be called; they have changed their name. They link with Macquarie uni. They always had a large number of Australian students in their pathways as well. It is quite a big area of business.

UCC has survived quite well in Canberra because our other competitor is really the TAFE. ANU College, which is UCC's equivalent at ANU, tends to specialise only in international students; they are not a competitor.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Do any of your students then go to university outside of Canberra?

Ms LONDON — We try very hard for them not to. Our mission was to pass students to the University of Canberra, so we have not set up any formal articulation arrangements. However, having said that, our students do apply to other universities, and some of them have been successful. We help facilitate that, but we do not actively encourage it. ANU has been known to take our students in years when they are under load. If they are full, they do not. That has been the approach of a lot of the other unis. UC Connect, we have had quite a number of students go to the University of Western Sydney because they have been interested in paramedical type degrees, which UC does not offer. We have taken people in who wanted to do things like speech therapy.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Have your numbers been increasing in the last few years?

Ms LONDON — No, we are on the decline. Our boom years were in the higher entry years. But, at the moment, the University of Canberra, like many other universities, has got quite low entry scores, so that tends to cannibalise our programs.

Mr KOTSIRAS — What were the numbers back then.

Ms LONDON — We would put about 600-plus students into the university. That was when the entry score was 75.

Mr KOTSIRAS — And now?

Ms LONDON — Now at UC they can enter at entry rank of 60.

Mr KOTSIRAS — How many students?

Ms LONDON — For us, that means we are putting in about 200 to 250 a year. It has fallen—it is directly in relationship to your entry scores.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Yes.

Mr DIXON — How many students are there at the University of Canberra?

Ms LONDON — 10,000. I think we are the second smallest university. We are quite small.

THE CHAIR — One thing I would just like to tease out that I think I have understood, but it has not quite been spelt out to us, is the issue about students choosing between tertiary packages and technical packages.

Ms LONDON — Yes.

THE CHAIR — Is that something that happens then as they start their VCE?

Ms LONDON — As they enter year 11. They commit either to what they call a tertiary package or the other one, which is called an accredited package.

THE CHAIR — So that's a VET course?

Ms LONDON — It does not have to be. They have other subjects in it that are non-VET. In the ACT in the senior colleges, students do not sit a formal HSC; it is progressive assessment. That has opened up lots of options for students. They get a year 12 certificate. Whether they get a UAI or not is separate to that. They all get a year 12 certificate.

THE CHAIR — So that provides part of your cohort — the ones who have chosen to do the technical or the accredited part and then decided that maybe they made a mistake back in year 11 and now they have got to make up for it?

Ms LONDON — Yes. It does create a unique opportunity to do a lot of work while they are still in year 12.

THE CHAIR — Those ones that have gone the accredited route with their VCE, are they the ones who have been successful in finishing your courses and going on to uni?

Ms LONDON — It is a bit of a mixture. Some of them are, and some are the lower ranked tertiary students. We get a bit of a mixture there.

THE CHAIR — Thank you.

Witness withdrew.