

CORRECTED VERSION

EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

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

Bairnsdale — 20 May 2008

Members

Mr M. Dixon	Mr S. Herbert
Mr N. Elasmar	Mr G. Howard
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Witnesses

Mr S. Kozlowski, chief executive officer, East Gippsland Shire Council; and
Mr B. Graham, director, strategic development, and
Mr D. Anderson, consultant, Wellington Shire Council.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — I declare open this hearing of the Education and Training Committee. The committee is hearing evidence today in relation to the inquiry into geographical differences in the rate in which Victorian students participate in higher education. I wish to advise that all evidence taken by the committee, including submissions, is subject to parliamentary privilege. Welcome. This is our third inquiry. The first was on school uniforms, which has been completed. The second is the inquiry into effective strategies for teacher PD, which is due to report to Parliament in December of this year; and the third is the one we are currently undertaking, which is our inquiry into geographical differences. That is to be submitted to Parliament in June of next year.

I welcome the shire council. The process is that you will present to us for about 15 minutes and then we will ask 15 minutes worth of questions at the end. Before you start I welcome Craig Ingram, the member for Gippsland East. You have 15 minutes and then we will ask you some questions.

Mr KOZLOWSKI — I might start the ball rolling. I am Steve Kozlowski, chief executive officer, East Gippsland Shire, representing the Gippsland Local Government Network. On behalf of the network I would like to thank the committee for the opportunity to present to you this morning, and to present to you on issues that are relevant to the six local councils in this region.

By way of introduction, the network comprises the local councils of Baw Baw, Bass Coast, Latrobe, South Gippsland, Wellington and East Gippsland. The region covers an area of almost 40 000 square kilometres, or just under 18 per cent of the total geographic area of Victoria. The major urban centres are Bairnsdale, Leongatha, Moe, Morwell, Sale, Drouin, Warragul and Wonthaggi, so we cover a fair area of the state.

You will, no doubt, already be aware that the Gippsland region has a substantial lower higher education participation rate than that of metropolitan Melbourne. The network considers that there are five main factors behind this. Essentially inadequate public transport. The lack of frequent reliable public transport is a major deterrent. The majority of public transport services are not coordinated with the timetables of major educational institutions, nor do they operate during peak times. In some parts of Gippsland many communities have no public transport at all. Our network suggests that regional public transport systems be improved, in particular in regard to more regular bus services connecting smaller communities to regional centres, and also to encourage students to attend regional campuses. Our network also suggests that additional morning and afternoon services, in terms of public transport, be provided to and from the city to better respond to demand. Additionally, better integration of bus services from rail stations to tertiary campuses could also be provided.

The second issue is in relation to distance from tertiary institutions. The regional alternative to attending a metropolitan university in Gippsland is the Gippsland campus of Monash University located in Churchill. Although it is in close proximity to some parts of the region, clearly it is still a major deterrent in terms of distance for a large number of Gippsland students, particularly those in the far east of our region. Our network suggests that major metropolitan universities and TAFEs be encouraged to expand their existing campuses in the regional areas, and also to open additional campuses in Gippsland, with state and federal government support.

The third is in relation to affordability, and that is the cost of participating in higher education. It is expensive, and course fees, books, accommodation, food, utilities, clothing et cetera have been estimated to cost the average regional student approximately \$20 000 a year. The average household income in rural and regional parts of Gippsland is substantially lower than the Melbourne counterpart. Many families struggle notwithstanding, and if they have to support a higher education student it makes it even worse.

It is not uncommon also to find university students juggling jobs, needing to deal with escalating HECS debts and also studying full-time. It is a hard task for many students, and particularly those from regional areas. Our network suggests that the state government may consider providing better access to scholarships to make a significant contribution to meeting living costs; perhaps reassessing the way the youth allowance is paid to encourage greater flexibility in the way students are able to attend lectures, particularly online opportunities; encouraging greater alternative course structures for some units so that high-intensity blocks rather than traditional one hour per day five days a week offerings; and also encouraging and supporting educational institutions to provide on-site, affordable rental accommodation for students from remote areas.

The fourth issue is the need for people to relocate. For many students relocation is the only option because of their geographic isolation and because of a lack of public transport and the high cost of tertiary studies. In particular the rural students who need to relocate to metropolitan Melbourne often feel isolated from their families and their

social networks. In some cases that could lead to apprehension about how that might pan out and would greatly influenced whether or not a student ultimately decided to pursue tertiary education. The vast majority of students aged in that younger bracket of 20 to 24 years who have relocated in order to study do not return to Gippsland once their education is complete. This further exacerbates the existing regional skills shortage and ageing population in our area; I cannot speak for other parts of Victoria. Our network suggests that the state government consider providing an allowance or lump-sum grant to assist regional students relocating for higher educational purposes to deal with that relocation issue.

The last point that the network wished to raised with you is the limited range of locally available tertiary courses. The number of courses offered within Gippsland is limited. The resources available tend to be a significant deterrent for people entering the tertiary area. Monash University's Gippsland campus at Churchill offers the largest range of courses. However, the lengthy travel time required still places it out of reach of some people within our region. Our network suggests quality higher education facilities need to be encouraged and developed in Gippsland. Again, our network recommends that the major metropolitan universities and TAFEs be encouraged to open regional campuses in Gippsland, with state and federal government support. Thank you.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Bruce, do you want to add anything?

Mr GRAHAM — Yes, indeed. My name is Bruce Graham and I am the director, strategic development at Wellington Shire Council. We would just like to add a little bit to the Gippsland Local Government Network submission. I have copies here which I can leave with you — —

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Thank you.

Mr GRAHAM — They are just some notes which we put them together which are further to the submission.

By way of background and emphasising what Steve indicated, there is low participation in higher education in Gippsland and in East Gippsland. Although there are a large number of university places in Australia, some 4000 to 5000 commonwealth-supported places are currently being handed back, which is a significant issue. Enrolment at Monash Gippsland at Churchill is very low compared to other regional campuses — and we have been looking at areas like Ballarat, for example, and other parts of the state, not just metropolitan areas. Over 70 per cent of university entrants leave Gippsland, and it is unlikely that many will return to Gippsland or Gippsland East after graduation. Also, and this is something which has emerged since we put our submission to you, there appears to be a culture of low education expectation and aspiration particularly in Gippsland. We tend to talk about that in other parts of regional Victoria. That is some background.

In terms of possible responses, Wellington Shire Council has recognised the problem and has taken some preliminary action to address it. What we have done is to establish a roundtable and an executive committee, which is a similar model to what was used in the development of the synchrotron project going back a little while. That is one of the reasons that we brought Donald Anderson on board, who is assisting council in terms of this background of work. The membership of the roundtable and executive committee is drawn from a wide range of people with experience in education, business, community and local government.

We have done some preliminary research, which was evidenced in the submission that was put to you going back a little while. In addition to that, we have been building alliances with a range of higher education institutions, including the TAFE sector, University of Melbourne, University of Ballarat and Trinity Foundation Studies. We have identified several potential university-level centres of excellence suitable to our situation. The sorts of areas that we have been looking at are higher value agriculture, forestry plantations and aviation, in conjunction with the East Gippsland Institute of TAFE.

The other thing we started to do was to investigate methods of addressing the culture of low education aspiration. There is a long way to go in respect to that one. We are suggesting a couple of ways forward: one could be development of a feasibility study by using external consultants for completion following the Bradley review, which is the commonwealth government study into higher education, so we would seek to feed into that process. A possible outcome of that would be potentially using space at the proposed new TAFE campus in Sale for university course delivery. We are already doing some of that with RMIT, and using some of the handed-back commonwealth-supported places in Gippsland and Gippsland East to deliver programs here in Gippsland. Thank you.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Don, do you want to add anything or just leave it?

Mr ANDERSON — Yes. By way of background, I did the original feasibility study and business plan for the synchrotron, and when we started that program, which was about 1997–98, the probability of success was kind of tiny but the upside was very high. This project is of a similar nature. If you say to someone you want to build a university in Gippsland, people's eyes kind of glaze. You have too many of them. It is true across the country but there is a deficiency here in Gippsland and East Gippsland, and the way I would express that is in a quantified way. If you look at Tasmania, Tasmania socioeconomically is like country Victoria. It is about 80 per cent national household median income. Tasmania has 1800 domestic — not international — undergraduates per 100 000 population, so there is a yardstick for you. By comparison, Melbourne metro has 2750; because of the higher incomes and the higher educational levels you get a higher proportion of people going to university.

If you take the five corridors going out of Melbourne, each of those corridors has a different level of participation. Deakin at Geelong and Warrnambool has about 1650, compared with 1800 in Tasmania, per 100 000 people; University of Ballarat has about 2200, and recognise that the corridor served by Ballarat, namely Central Highlands and the Wimmera, is a larger area than Gippsland and East Gippsland and smaller in population, and they have done it. They have quite a large number of people going to university. Over 70 per cent of their graduates stay in the region. If you look at Gippsland, Monash at Churchill has 679 students per 100 000 people in Gippsland. The only subject in which they capture the majority of university entrants is nursing. Over 70 per cent of the university entrants from Gippsland will leave Gippsland and never come back. So you have a major social problem, and that is I why said to Bruce what we need to do is create a new university of some kind.

We have some thoughts about that, and what we are not proposing is a standard what I would call Dawkins-model university. We are suggesting a program which would be a series of strategic alliances. From a business sense try to increase your variable costs and reduce your fixed costs; so reduce your capital costs, reduce your fixed costs of overhead and have a low-cost entrance into provision of higher education, and I think that is where we are going.

Mr HALL — Thank you Steve, Bruce and Donald for coming in and presenting that pretty important information for us. It is handy for us to get a perspective on that situation in East Gippsland. Bruce, can you just elaborate on the handing back of commonwealth-funded places from the Gippsland region? What has actually occurred there?

Mr GRAHAM — It is not just the Gippsland region. It is right across the board, Peter. It relates to the number of places that are there in this current year that have actually been handed back across Australia.

Mr HALL — Is that places like Monash which have handed back positions that could have — —

Mr GRAHAM — All universities — it is right across the board. Four and a half to five thousand places.

Mr HALL — Is that because of lack of demand?

Mr GRAHAM — Yes, that is our understanding.

Mr ANDERSON — There is oversupply nationally. There is no doubt about that but there is undersupply here.

Mr HALL — In terms of RMIT's venture into East Gippsland, it seems to me that that has been successful from your knowledge in terms of limited delivery?

Mr GRAHAM — Yes, and I guess what we are suggesting is that that sort of thing could go further.

Mr HALL — And that is what your model for Sale or indeed East Gippsland as well is: a similar sort of model where we have existing facilities from which higher ed providers can actually deliver programs forward.

Mr GRAHAM — Correct.

Mr HALL — It seems to me that is a better alternative than actually exporting kids out of the region by way of scholarships et cetera, because that way you take kids away from the region whereas if you can have that other model you are aiming for, you are importing and keeping young people and also programs in the region.

Mr GRAHAM — Yes, and if you look at our submission that we sent in, we have a case study in there that actually talks about that where there is a student who actually stayed in nursing at RMIT at the Sale campus of the TAFE college, so that just underlines that.

Mr KOZLOWSKI — If I might just respond to that, I think that there needs to be a healthy balance between those who are encouraged to move to higher specialist-type courses and those who might be attracted to the more generalist-type courses that could be offered locally. I think if we put all our eggs in one basket and just provided a solution that was local, we may in fact provide disincentives to local students perhaps seeking medicine or law or perhaps some higher specialist-type fields that they would not otherwise be able to pursue.

Mr HALL — You are never going to provide for everybody but provide for what is popular and needed in the area. The last question for me is, have you got any ideas why Churchill attracts a lesser proportion of the Gippsland population than the other regional universities? Is it the attraction of the bright city lights or is it the range of courses provided at Monash Gippsland?

Mr GRAHAM — Probably anecdotally — because we have not actually investigated this in great detail — it seems to be location is one of the issues — that is, it is difficult to get to from a transport point of view — but also I think it is the course offerings as well.

Mr KOZLOWSKI — I think that those who need to travel — that is, relocate — probably find that it is no different to relocate to Churchill than it might be to metropolitan Melbourne provided they can overcome the dislocation factor of living in the metropolitan area. If you make that choice to relocate then it really does not matter if it is relocate to Churchill or relocate to Melbourne in many cases.

Mr HALL — How would that work then for an Omeo person having to relocate to Bairnsdale to attend the university campus in Bairnsdale? Would that not be a similar sort of — —

Mr KOZLOWSKI — I think you are talking about greater distances when you are talking Omeo to Bairnsdale compared with Omeo to Churchill or Omeo to Melbourne. Proximity within the region is still relevant to someone in Omeo.

Mr HALL — Within the region, yes, that is the attraction and the difference.

Mr KOZLOWSKI — It is still East Gippsland.

Mr HERBERT — Thank you very much, gentlemen. It is good to hear some solutions as well as problems in the presentation that was made. Can I just explore a bit, Steve, your statement that the vast majority do not come back, those who are going to Melbourne or Gippsland or wherever or Churchill do not come back. Does that mean that you have a continually sliding population decline, or are you finding other people are coming in with various qualifications, and if that is the case, what sort of qualifications are those moving into the region bringing with them?

Mr KOZLOWSKI — The difficulty is being able to attract those students who have graduated out of secondary school who need to go higher education. What we have found is that there is not an immediate call back of those once they have reached their graduation. What we have found though is that there has been a number of instances when people have come back after 15, 20, 25 years to sort of resettle after they have done whatever they have done in metropolitan Melbourne or elsewhere. There is a population increase in much of Gippsland and in our area, in East Gippsland in particular, that has a lot to do with early retirees in the main. But there has been a recent influx of younger families coming to the area as well, basically because of affordability issues and so on. But we still find there is that gap between the students who leave here to go to higher education — anecdotally they take some time, if they do come back, to come back at all, and that is the current situation.

Mr HERBERT — But you do have a population increase. It is mitigated by other factors?

Mr KOZLOWSKI — Yes. The population increase is producing a different mix. The demographic profile in the area is changing, and it is a greater rate of ageing than perhaps you might find elsewhere because of that

Mr HERBERT — Can I just explore that again? It seems to me — and I am going to be quite frank — that putting in a kind of online centre in each little town with maybe one or two staff is not a particularly good public policy position.

Mr ANDERSON — We are not suggesting that.

Mr HERBERT — The good public policy relates to where your skill shortages are, where you see your regional economies growing and the sort of professional band you need in that area — and taking the point made here: keeping people in here. For me the question of a low-capital, low-recurrent cost kind of scenario would be whether you could factor in the sort of courses you need for that type of delivery or whatever type of delivery, say, that meets your skill shortages and regional economy needs. I wonder if you could elaborate a little on that, because to me that is the secret.

Mr ANDERSON — I guess that is why we have chosen the centres of excellence we have chosen. With climate change, most of Victoria is going to dry out, but Gippsland is going to stay wet because the subtropical systems are coming south; they are coming round the corner, so this is going to stay wet. The value of agricultural land in the last year here in Gippsland has gone up by 50 per cent. The market is starting to understand the potential of Gippsland agriculturally. That is why we have chosen high-value agriculture as a potential centre of excellence. All of this, by the way, is subject to a proper feasibility study by people other than us sitting here. This is very preliminary thinking.

The air force is looking to move all of its officer training and pilot training into Sale. You have got Gippsland Aeronautics et cetera, so there is a potential aviation cluster which the state government is working on. That could be another centre of excellence. Fishing and forestry, education — they are potential centres of excellence. If you take the University of Ballarat, it has got four. One of the things that amazes me about the University of Ballarat is that it has a very large mathematics department; it has got 5 professors and 80 academic staff, which you would not believe of a provincial university like Ballarat. There are potential things you could do.

If you look at the latest work in education, and we had a meeting yesterday in Melbourne of people doing this, there are new ways of doing education rather than a 19th century method. There are some 21st-century techniques we could be looking at which would be a different way of doing it. But nevertheless you need to have people here teaching students.

Mr HERBERT — You are essentially proposing that you would have specialist centres of excellence in the high-TAFE degree streams as opposed to more generalist, which is the other model people have that fits itself into online kind of learning.

Mr ANDERSON — That is right. If you look at generation Z, they are very focused on, ‘What can this do for me and what I want to do?’. They have a different set of expectations to X and Y, and we have to move to what they want.

Mr DIXON — Don might be quick to answer this one or give an opinion. There are two issues in regional Victoria. One is getting students to try further education in the first place. Is it a worthwhile model to have a TAFE base in your first year locally, and then the demons are confronted and they are more likely to go elsewhere? Secondly, the problem obviously here is having the students back and somehow trying to have the placements in their final year, depending what their course is, or even some subjects in their final year, back close to home. Do those two models meet some needs?

Mr ANDERSON — One of the reasons we are talking to Trinity College Foundation Studies — do you know them at all?

Mr DIXON — No.

Mr ANDERSON — They are up at Trinity College at the University of Melbourne. They run a program for young people coming from Vietnam, Malaysia, wherever. To sum it up, they introduce them to the Western canon: the way we think. They are quite successful at that and are at the top end.

I should just mention that our educational consultant on this program is Professor Kwong Lee Dow from the University of Melbourne. Kwong and I had a meeting with Trinity Foundation Studies. They are currently working

with the University of Melbourne to run a two-calendar year program for indigenous students for first year because, effectively, if you have come from an Aboriginal culture you have come from a different culture to the one that we have, so there needs to be an introduction to that. They are very good at taking people from a situation which is different to a metropolitan norm in Australia and getting them into university. That is why we are talking to them. When I talk about different ways of doing things, these are some of the examples of what I am talking about. Does that answer your question?

Mr DIXON — It does, thank you. A question to Steve: specifically what are the skills needs here in this area?

Mr KOZLOWSKI — A range of skills. The existing educational offering here is reasonable in terms of business courses, TAFE-type trade courses and so on. We have an excellent TAFE college that is linked with RMIT but also has marine-based education down in Lakes Entrance. We also have the Australian Technical College. Anecdotally, though, we do hear that there is a disconnect between business taking up the young students in terms of trade places and so on, so there is a disconnection between that happening at the moment. There is a range of need in terms of primary production, and I think the type of course offerings that would be desirable into the future perhaps are not the ones that are currently necessarily being provided if we are looking at the changing landscape and the effect of climate on current primary production operations within the region. We are really looking for perhaps an expansion of what currently exists.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Can I ask a question to Bruce or to Steve? Yesterday we heard that not all scholarships at Monash University are taken up by students. Can you ascertain why students in this region are not taking up the scholarships that are offered?

Mr KOZLOWSKI — That is a good question. East Gippsland shire offers four scholarships for students to live on campus at Churchill to study. Out of those four over the last few years we have not had a full take-up of those, and we have had to relax the criteria for students so that they do not necessarily have to live on campus to be able to attract that scholarship. We have yet to really hit the nail on the head in terms of why that occurs.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — If finance is an issue, you would think that more and more students would opt for the scholarships.

Mr KOZLOWSKI — You would think so, and I think what it is saying is that people are making choices about whether they go to Churchill or not for other reasons. I think it is more about the desirability of the courses, their attitude towards living away from home and those sorts of issues rather than the actual financial support. It may well be that the financial support is only a small part of the total financial support required, and it is not a significant enough incentive for them to take it on.

Mr HALL — One of the issues you mentioned, Steve — and I think it has been commented on across the submissions and been mentioned to us — is the aspirational level of students. That is an issue that we need to address. Because mum or dad have not gone to uni, they do not think of doing it. I noticed, Bruce, in your submission that only 6 per cent of Wellington Shire residents, only about half of the state average, have actually got a degree background.

Mr KOZLOWSKI — That is right.

Mr HALL — Have you got any creative ideas about how we can lift that aspirational level of the young people?

Mr KOZLOWSKI — I think we need to do a fair bit more work on the issue. I think part of it is what Donald was talking about in terms of almost the culture of higher education, if you like; getting that inculcated. It clearly is not in this region to the extent that it is in other places. We do not really know what the answer is.

Mr HALL — The presence of providers would help.

Mr KOZLOWSKI — Yes.

Mr ANDERSON — I might mention that tomorrow I am going to see a Dr Barry Golding at the University of Ballarat, who has done work for East Gippsland TAFE on expectation and aspiration to try and understand this sort of question you have just raised. In his view, from what he told me on the telephone before I

made the appointment, Gippsland is qualitatively different to the rest of the state in terms of expectation and aspiration, so it is a big issue, and we do not really understand it in sufficient depth to make any decision about how you would actually address it. But it is on our agenda.

Mr HALL — Any feedback on that would be handy.

Mr KOZLOWSKI — Peter, just in relation to perhaps other ways of looking at how to encourage students to actually see the value of higher education, one of the things may well be marketing the successes of others within the region and seeing them as perhaps role models that they might aspire to. I think that we are looking at the converse argument — that the parents have not done it before, the family has not done it before; they have lived on a farm perhaps, and they do not see the benefit of moving forward; they see that living in the region is paramount, and they cannot see the connection. But if there were a demonstrable series of role models who were marketed within a particular region, it may in fact demonstrate the value of gaining those qualifications and so on.

The other area would be the bonding of providing financial support, whether it is studentships or the like, similar to what used to happen 30 years ago where employers — perhaps notable employers within regions — offered those types of scholarships or studentships that then supported students in higher education but guaranteed employment back into the area for a period of time. Again it would demonstrate not only that there was a series of successes capable of being demonstrated in a region but also that there was a commitment by the region to support those people in that higher education pursuit.

Mr HALL — There have been in the area some programs — I think undertaken by the Gippsland Local Government Network — about having ambassadors to the region. I just wonder whether there has been any thought in the East Gippsland or Wellington shires having a similar program that is local, with ambassadors who come back — you know, the ambassador for the month, or something — and highlight the achievements of Gippsland people, because there are some remarkably clever people and some remarkable stories of kids from rather isolated areas achieving so well in a diverse range of higher education, from the arts right through to the top sciences.

Mr ANDERSON — A thought we have had is that the University of Sydney, for example, runs a blog on ‘What do you think of life at the university of Sydney?’. If we got funding for a feasibility study, we could set up a blog which would invite comments from people from higher education who come from Gippsland, or the kids — ‘Why would you want to do higher education in Gippsland or somewhere else?’, to try and get good, hard data on these sorts of issues, because that is the way they talk to one another.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — I thank you, East Gippsland shire, Wellington shire and Don, for your contributions; they are much appreciated. Thank you very much.

Witnesses withdrew.

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Witnesses

Mr P. Burslem, chair, and

Ms L. Wilkinson, executive officer, Gippsland East LLEN.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — I welcome the LLEN to this inquiry. The process is you make your contribution for 15 minutes, and then we ask questions for the last 15 minutes. Linda, you start off.

Ms WILKINSON — I will start off. I will probably talk a little bit on some of the findings from the LLEN's perspective. Peter is actually here with a couple of hats on. He is actually the chair of the LLEN, but he is also a parent. I thought perhaps he should talk on both of those aspects.

We have certainly for some time been concerned about what I see as the inequities in access to further education between the country and the city. When you look at the data that we have collected over the last little while you see that certainly there is not the take-up. One of the things we have been very concerned about of late has been the massive increase in deferral rates. That has gone from about 9 per cent two years ago through to 19.8 per cent last year. You may have heard of this at some other hearings but there are about 12 rural LLENs which are partnering with Melbourne University and also the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria to do some research to find out just why that is — why are we seeing that massive increase in deferrals? Is it a financial constraint that is stopping young people accessing further education? Is it that they stay at home for that 12 months to earn enough money so they are eligible for youth allowance? Is it because they filled in a VTAC form without really thinking about what they actually wanted to do, so they give themselves a year to think about whether they really want to take up that place? They are the sorts of questions we have been asking. We are hopeful that the first cut of that research data will be ready in about June. I know that YACVic has been in touch with you too, but we will certainly make sure that as soon as we have got that data set we get that through to the committee so that you have got something to consider there too, because I think that will give us some meat: some real evidence. A lot of what we talk about is anecdotal, and I am really looking forward to actually being able to either debunk it or support it with some data. They are our sorts of concerns.

I was actually talking to Karen when we started to organise this about the fact that I think we do not realise how isolated some of our patches are down here. The Gippsland LLEN covers from Rosedale to Mallacoota up to the hills, Omeo and beyond and down to Yarram. We have young people who have to relocate to go to secondary school. When you start looking at relocating for TAFE or relocating for university, most of our kids have to relocate to go to university. We have the two courses that are done in partnership with TAFE, and I think that is a fabulous partnership with RMIT and TAFE to be able to offer those courses, but the rest of the young people who do get university places have to relocate. One of our concerns is the cost of that for young people and their families. When you look at the average household income in this patch you realise that for some families it is an enormous stretch to find the \$20 000 to send their kids to either Churchill or Melbourne to study. That is one of the reasons I think that young people discovered — I will not call it a loophole because I might actually block that loophole; that youth allowance option to be independent — and then get the independent youth allowance to be able to then have a chance of going to university, because for a lot of families it would be almost impossible, regardless of the kid's ability.

I guess they are the sorts of things I wanted to highlight today. They are probably the things that you have heard at other hearings as well. I might actually hand over to Peter, who could perhaps speak as a parent as well. You have obviously had the written submission, so I will not go through all that, but I certainly have got a lot of data here if people want to take some data away. One of the things that we did do — and I promised Karen I would get a copy to you — is the transport report we did with the two shires a couple of years ago, which really identifies the transport and the lack of it, which is another huge issue.

Mr BURSLEM — With deferrals, as a parent the one thing that you really do notice is that you lose your children at a very early age; they go to another city to be independent and to have that deferral period. Both my daughters deferred. I think it was a good thing. It gave them time to grow up a bit before they were fully independent. Probably that is about it.

Mr ELASMAR — Just on the deferral issue, do the majority of people come back or do they lose interest?

Ms WILKINSON — We do not know. One of the questions we have is: how many of those who defer actually take up their places? We do not know that. That is part of the research we are doing, because that was one of my concerns. We have got a 20 per cent deferral rate. That is great if 18 per cent of that 20 per cent actually take up their places, but if only 5 per cent of that 20 per cent take up their places, then we have got a concern about what are the impacts on young people if they are not taking up those places. And if they are not, what are they doing?

Are they what I call ‘floating’ out there, or have they taken up some other meaningful pathway? They might have got a job; who knows? We do not know that, but hopefully this research will give us some — across most of the regions of Victoria we should get a really good collection of data to tell us that.

In terms of coming back to our region, that is a really hard thing to measure. It is really hard to know. We talk about all these kids exiting but I think what actually happens when we look at the data — there is an exit, there is no doubt about that — but the young people who stay here, and there is a percentage who do, who take up apprenticeships or TAFE places or employment become invisible because they are not this huddle of collective kids any more; they turn into young adults, and I do not know that we actually see them. They are still there, but we are unable to quantify them and say, ‘That is a young person who stayed here and finished year 12 last year’, because they turn into these amazing young people who become young adults and join the community in whatever capacity. How to measure that is a bit of a conundrum. I do not have the answer for that, unfortunately, because I would love to know what percentage do leave and what percentage do stay, post-year 12, and perhaps that following year, and sadly that deferral data is not going to give us that really; it will give us a little inkling but not a really good look. That is a question still I think. It is something that we might need to think about. I have no idea what sort of methodology one would use to find that out, so we need to keep that question in the forefront of our minds.

Mr ELASMAR — Peter, parents — how do they feel about it? Do they encourage the kids to defer university because they do not want them to leave home or because of financial issues?

Mr BURSLEM — In my case it was purely my daughters’ choice. They had never earned a dollar in their lives and this is their first chance. Going through the later years of secondary school, especially for those who have aspirations for university, is a very tough couple of years for them. They are really head down and tail up for a period of time, and I think it is their time to unwind, relax a little bit and get a few dollars behind them. Like I say, from a parent’s point of view, I think it is a good thing to see them have another year or so to grow up a bit before I am happy with them being down in Melbourne.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Over the last few weeks we have travelled around Victoria and one of the main reasons students decide to defer is financial, as well as transport reasons, and a lack of courses, but we have also heard that despite the fact there are financial scholarships, students are not taking up those scholarships. We heard this morning from the shire saying they find it very hard to find people for the full scholarships that they run. Why aren’t students taking up the scholarships, if finance is an issue? Is it the careers teachers, a lack of advice coming through to the school — what is the issue?

Ms WILKINSON — I think there are a couple of issues there. One is perhaps the promotion of the fact that those scholarships are actually available so that parents and others know that they are and perhaps what the process is to apply. I do not know what the process is for allocation by East Gippsland shire. That might go direct through schools; it might be that the schools choose someone who is eligible. I do not know how that process works. Again, it might come back to perhaps a process that has some barriers. I am going to perhaps catch up with Steve at some stage to have a chat with him about how we can support him to promote his scholarships so that parents and young people out there know they are available.

I think also the other issue is that if you are looking for say \$20 000 to send a young person to Melbourne, sometimes the scholarships are a help — I cannot deny that — but there is still quite a shortfall to find the rest of that money for the average family down here. So while \$5000 would be certainly helpful, it may not tip the balance in favour of going at that point in time. But certainly I think promotion might be one of the issues, so that is something I will be following up. Peter, did you know they existed?

Mr BURSLEM — What, the scholarships?

Ms WILKINSON — Yes.

Mr BURSLEM — Yes, both my daughters got the federal rural scholarship, and that has been a great help, but it is dependent on income, so taxable income has to be reduced as much as possible to get advantage from that. I think I would just put it down to aspirations — that a lot of young people are not all that keen on —

The DEPUTY CHAIR — In line with that Peter, do universities go into local schools to lift the aspirations of students? Do you know how many do that?

Mr BURSLEM — I do not think so.

Ms WILKINSON — They do; they do actually. They do visit schools, they are also involved with some of our career expos that we run as well. I would say that careers teachers probably promote universities quite heavily. At some schools I have spoken to there is an expectation that every student in year 12 will fill in a VTAC form in September, regardless of what their aspirations might be. I think that part of the process is in place for those who have reached year 12. I think probably the next step is gaining a place somewhere that is comfortable to go to. Some of the data we have shows that a lot of our young people are going to rural universities in other parts of Victoria, so they might go to Ballarat. The majority go to Churchill but some might go to — —

The DEPUTY CHAIR — But do they understand the consequences of going to Ballarat? We had a student yesterday who had put down Ballarat as one of his courses on the VTAC form, not thinking he would get the offer, and he got the offer and he realised, ‘It is too far to go, I haven’t got the money’, so he deferred. Is the advice given to students to make the appropriate choice?

Ms WILKINSON — The advice might be there but I think readiness of the young person to both hear and absorb some of that advice is probably one of the things. If you think back to yourselves when you were in the latter years of high school and thinking, ‘What on earth am I going to do?’ — I do not imagine any of you thought you would be politicians. Did you?

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Did we? No! Why would you?

Ms WILKINSON — You may have but it may not have been forefront of your minds. So I think what you need to think about is a young person in say year 10, 11 or 12 is bombarded with an enormous array of opportunities, much more than we would have faced at their age, and very specific things. It is not like you might just want to be a biologist. You will actually choose what very specific area of biology you might want to go into, and that is what people are expected to do. So a young person in year 12 confronted with a VTAC form — and I picture this; I do not know for sure — I do not know whether there are any teachers in the room. I imagine they sit down, everybody gets a VTAC form and somebody says, ‘Fill it in!’ They have probably had interviews with the careers teacher, they have thought about it, and they might want to do forensic science, let’s say; it is very popular at the moment, hard to get into, and attractive. So they might put Deakin forensic science, without any thought about what that actually means because at that point in time it sounds really good.

I think that is part of the issue with choosing a pathway — the readiness to choose a pathway that may not be for life but may be for a fair chunk of your life. It is huge really. Maybe that is one of the reasons we are seeing those deferral years increasing — because it does give people that breathing space to say, ‘When I watched *CSI* in year 11 that sounded really good but I am not sure I want to cut up dead bodies anymore, so I have got a year to think about what I would really rather do, and I might be able to then negotiate a place somewhere else to do something that now, a year later, I am perhaps a bit more au fait with’.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Okay, thank you.

Mr HALL — First of all, thanks, Linda and Peter, for a very informative submission and the comments you have made this morning. I want to take this conversation back a step because in your submission it has been identified that we have actually low retention rates in East Gippsland and also the greater Gippsland region — far lower than the metropolitan retention rates and lower than state averages. So to get to university you need to either complete your year 12 or take an alternative pathway course to get to university. Should we as a committee therefore be directing some effort back to secondary school level and even primary school level to address that issue about retention rates before taking the next step, which is participation in higher ed?

Ms WILKINSON — Can I just talk about retention rates a little bit? How can I say this? It is one measure of success of the education in the region. What we also have in this region is higher-than-state-average take-up of apprenticeships and traineeships. We do not, at a state level, count the percentage of those who go into apprenticeships and traineeships; we do not celebrate that. They slide out of the picture and end up being part of that loss-of-retention picture. I think that is one thing that we need to look at: how we measure some of what I call success. Because I think getting an apprenticeship or a traineeship should still be considered success. While our retention rates may be regarded as low, we need to offset that with that thought. I think in lots of ways we have actually moved too far towards the expectation that every young person is going to go to university. Our current take-up rate is about 32 per cent. It averaged around 32 per cent, according to the On Track data, over the last five

years. I cannot remember what our apprenticeship rate is off the top of my head, but certainly that is higher than the state average.

University, for people who are heading through school, is actually often the only conversation they have heard. Sometimes, probably up until the last two years, leaving school and going to an apprenticeship has been actually almost seen as a failure, because you had not done year 12 and had not gone to university. The rhetoric was impacting that way. Perhaps we need to go back to thinking about whether university is the only pathway.

I think what we need to be able to do is to perhaps raise the conversation with young people earlier — I think in year 8 — and say, ‘Okay these are the sorts of things you could start thinking about. You do not have to make up your mind now, but let’s expose you to a range of opportunities — both here at home, so if you choose to stay at home there are some opportunities, but if you go away to study, these are the opportunities too’. That is starting to happen more. I think there has been a realisation that we do need to start exposing younger and younger students to those opportunities because the range of pathways is increasing, and as you say, the range of pathways to actually get to a university career even if you did not complete year 12 is still there, and I am not sure that that message is getting through to young people — that if at first you do not succeed, try plan B, because there usually is a plan B to sneak in the back door a couple of years down the track. I am not sure there are enough plan B conversations going on in terms of letting young people know what the possible pathways are.

When we first started doing the On Track connect project that follows the On Track data collection, when we got the list of young people who had not taken up a pathway to contact and found out where they are, I was really disturbed to find so many young people whose lives were over because they had not got into the course of their choice. What concerned me was a lot of these were kids who had wanted to do nursing, and there had been no-one who had then said to them, ‘Do you realise there is a very neat little plan B for nursing, because if you go to your TAFE college and enrol in the certificate IV, you can do first year, and then you might be able to then apply to get into the second year of nursing at a university?’. That had not got through to those young people. I think it is getting through more because I think the LLEN itself and other players have been talking more about those plan Bs, so we have not had quite so many disturbing phone calls of late. That has been, I think, an improvement, but I think that is perhaps one of the things we need to think about. There are different ways of getting there.

Mr HALL — Yes, I think that is a very good answer, and I do not disagree with your comments. It does disturb me sometimes when you see in this document, which is a good document in itself, that it aims to achieve 90 per cent retention rate by certain years, when it is not taking into account the alternative pathways that somebody could pursue in a life career, other than just getting to university.

Ms WILKINSON — What I would actually like to see, Peter, is the government — or the department I suppose really — start to think about how we could measure those other things, those other successes, so that we do not depend on the retention rate. I have always seen the retention rate as one measure, but it is a little bit spurious in a sense, because you are not actually measuring the same 100 kids who started there. It is not necessarily the same 100 kids who get to the other end. There just happens to be 100, but they are not necessarily the same ones, so in lots of ways we still do not know enough about what has happened in between that year 7 and that year 12.

Mr HALL — Linda, the other question I wanted to ask relates to one of your suggestions to us, which is:

Mixed delivery of courses, with some face-to-face, some online, some group tutorials et cetera —

and that is a concept which has certainly been floated by a number of people in their submissions. No-one has yet been able to point us to a successful model that is in existence which does that at the moment. Do you have any knowledge of where that is working?

Ms WILKINSON — I actually think RMIT nursing does some of that mixed delivery, so that what you can do is cope with those young people who are perhaps more isolated and are doing things that way. I think there have probably been a few people dabbling with it. I think it has happened. Maybe I could do some sussing out and see where that has been happening. Certainly with regional delivery it is an option, and it is certainly an option that is not too difficult, I would not have thought, given that distance education has existed in this state for a long time in various forms.

Mr HALL — So we should talk to RMIT or East Gippsland TAFE to get an understanding — —

Ms WILKINSON — Get an idea of how that works.

Mr HALL — About how they are actually delivering that.

Ms WILKINSON — Yes.

Mr HALL — Okay, that is good.

Mr DIXON — You have said in your submission that Monash used to have an outreach centre here in Bairnsdale. What did they do there? How did that work?

Ms WILKINSON — That is going back a bit. Some other people in this room might know a bit more than I do. Certainly there was an office in Main Street. It had classrooms, there were computer rooms. It was designed I guess for a number of reasons. One was as an entry point for people who wanted to go in there and say, 'I would like to go to Monash; how do I do this?'. It was also a point for some of those distance education students to actually come together for tutorials and/or have access to equipment and a place for support, and I have a feeling that there was some face-to-face delivery done in that facility. I am trying to think which year it was that it went. It was probably back in about the mid-90s, would be my guess — and I am getting a nod over there. That was sad for this region because it gave a bit of a focus for young people and others — and we are talking adult learners as well — to say, 'Okay, I can pop in there and just find out how I can access Monash courses'. Now Monash in Churchill is distant. You cannot get there by public transport from here, so it is a relocation thing for most of our young people.

Mr DIXON — The way you describe that outreach centre I would have thought that it would have been an ideal sort of online delivery, where you could actually go and update and have somebody there.

Ms WILKINSON — And even better now.

Mr DIXON — That is right, yes, especially with improved technology.

Ms WILKINSON — Absolutely.

Mr DIXON — You also mentioned earlier briefly in passing about students who access university via TAFE certificate courses and what have you. You talked about it in terms of nursing, but do you think in other trades and skill areas there are students equipped to do that, and that could be a way that perhaps could be highlighted more?

Ms WILKINSON — I think that some of that articulation from TAFE to university is being worked on at the moment. I know that our local TAFE has been working on some of those with Monash. I also know that Chisholm TAFE has been working with Monash Frankston to look at how some of those pathways can be built in so that there is some credit given for your TAFE courses. It is not as easy in some industry areas because TAFE in some industry areas is very practical, and of course you hit university and it becomes very theoretical in lots of industry areas, but not all. There is also the potential for TAFE institutes now to actually start delivering diplomas and degree courses, so I think there are going to be some more linkages happening between TAFEs and institutes and universities for that very reason, and I do not see that necessarily as competition. I see that perhaps if they start off offering diplomas and advanced diplomas, then that is another point of articulation into a university pathway. I would hope there are more conversations happening around that and some streamlining, so it is not too cumbersome and some of those barriers are reduced.

Mr HALL — How do you encourage that, Linda, when you have got one arm controlled by state government and one arm by federal government and you are trying to get the articulation between the two and the funding arrangements there for it?

Ms WILKINSON — It is like so much between sectors, Peter; it is goodwill. If you can get the right people around the table, it is amazing what you can actually achieve. Once something like that is set in place in those sorts of sectors it is sustainable. It is not dependent on individuals because it becomes embedded in practice. But largely in terms of those opening conversations it is goodwill. Catherine will probably agree with me that having RMIT coming down into this region was about a conversation, saying, 'How about it? Let's see how we can make this work', and finding the right people to say, 'Yes, it would work for nursing and business in this time frame', and I think it is those sorts of things. Chisholm and Monash Frankston — we are going back about five or

six years now when they were having those conversations — that was just two people who said, ‘Let’s have a conversation and see how we can make this work better for our students’.

Mr HALL — Is there potential to establish a skills store concept for higher education, so that recognition of higher learning can therefore be generally applied to higher ed as well? So that if somebody walks in off the street they can therefore determine how much credit they might get for their prior learning towards a degree from Monash or this particular group at RMIT?

Ms WILKINSON — I would like to think so, Peter, however, higher ed is a whole different kettle of fish in terms of recognition, and every different university is offering different things. The one advantage we have with the TAFE system is that it is a national system and it has nationally accredited programs that are transportable, so it is very recognisable. With competency-based training you can match competencies with the learning outcomes required for a certificate. For higher education that is not quite as simple. Let us imagine I was walking into a higher skills store and I had done some work with the indigenous community down here. How could I then demonstrate to a university that I could have some prior standing in some subjects in indigenous studies? I think universities would find that really difficult to do. Again, it is worth a conversation; do not let us dismiss it out of hand. I would like the higher education sector to have a think about that — ‘Is it possible?’ — because it could be.

Mr HALL — It is a matter of an attempt to try and improve pathways, isn’t it?

Ms WILKINSON — Yes, and I think that step, Peter, in terms of looking at the TAFE pathways to higher education is a step in the right direction. If we can get that right then maybe this other pathway might suddenly be built into that somewhere around there, because, by default, it might just happen because you can get prior recognition for the TAFE bit, it might just sort of sneak in the back door for the higher education system. But the higher education sector is a complex sector, with each institution being self-managing in terms of its delivery and what it wants to see as its areas of excellence, if you like. Also you need to think about the mixed role of a university between research and teaching. There is all that sort of complication that comes into that as well.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Linda and Peter, thank you very much.

Ms WILKINSON — Thank you for having us.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — And I thank the LLEN for its submission. It is much appreciated.

Ms WILKINSON — It is our pleasure.

Witnesses withdrew.

CORRECTED VERSION

EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

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

Bairnsdale — 20 May 2008

Members

Mr M. Dixon	Mr S. Herbert
Mr N. Elasmarr	Mr G. Howard
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Witnesses

Mr J. Ireland, coordinator, School Focused Youth Service, and

Ms J. Crealy, coordinator, Reconnect program, Gippsland Lakes Community Health.

The CHAIR — John and Jacinta, I welcome you to this inquiry. The process is you speak for 15 minutes and then we ask questions for the last 15 minutes. John, are you going to start off?

Mr IRELAND — Absolutely; I am John Ireland. I am the School Focused Youth Service coordinator for East Gippsland. I work in all the schools — primary and secondary; government and non-government — from Bairnsdale down to Mallacoota and up to Omeo. Jacinta is the Reconnect coordinator. She works in Lakes Entrance and east — —

Ms CREALY — Lakes Entrance and Orbost mainly — 12 to 18-year-olds at risk of homelessness.

Mr IRELAND — I suppose what we are going to tell you is not going to be any news by now. Really I think there are some fairly simple principles in the whole thing, and I am sure that Linda would have outlined some of those before we came in. We will also leave you with this document which we have prepared. It is just a few pages looking at the questions that you posed and attempting to provide an answer for each one. We are not going to read from that, we are just going to talk around those themes. Any statistics and so on that we have will be in there.

Are students from different areas in Victoria more or less likely to apply for university? In Gippsland our figures are much lower, which the On Track data has certainly shown. It is about half of the uptake of university places of inner suburban Melbourne. We do not have the obvious quick access to universities from here. That is pretty clear. It is a 3-hour drive. Young people have to support themselves. I suppose I could also say, just in preface to the remarks, that I am in the middle of this — I have two children at university right now, so I understand this intimately. Both my children took a gap year. They did not look around and say, ‘Mum and Dad have got \$40 000 at the end of the year they do not know what to do with, so we will go off to university’. It is a very expensive exercise from here. It costs between \$15 000 and \$20 000 to keep a young person alive, to support them at university. A large number of young people take a gap year in order to earn the money to get the independent living allowance.

Unfortunately for a number of people that gets them into a comfortable rut. They think, ‘I am making \$20 000’, or ‘Next year I could be making \$20 000 a year. I will stay here and do that’. A number of those who defer do not take up the option. There would also be a number who do take up the option and then come back. That is to do with homesickness basically — it is a lack of connection, it is a lack of support networks around them. We were trying to find the figure for that and we cannot, but there is a figure that I have seen, and it is a fairly high percentage. It is something like between 5 per cent and 10 per cent of young people who take up a university position give it up halfway through the first year. The percentage of young people doing that is much higher for those who live in isolation, live in private accommodation rather than living on campus. Living on campus has its own costs involved, and that is a lot more than the independent living allowance would allow for. The independent living allowance plus rent assistance would be lucky to make the rental cost of on-campus accommodation without the cost of food and all the other ancillary bits. There are some significant costs involved even when young people are involved in the independent living allowance. I will pass over to Jacinta for a few minutes.

Ms CREALY — Picking it up from there, as John and I were leaving the office a moment ago — and we both work at Gippsland Lakes Community Health — one of the other workers who is a single mum said she could barely afford to get her kids through sporting clubs let alone going to university. It was because she was single and just simply could not afford to send them to Melbourne. That is a really the story that we hear.

The independent youth allowance is generally only available to young people who cannot live at home for some reason, as distinct from the allowance that is given to young people who are studying away from home, so they are two different allowances. I believe the study allowance is actually less than the independent youth allowance. I suppose that is one area that John and I were discussing. Not only do they have the normal rental costs but they are going to Melbourne where rental costs are even higher and all of the things that go along with being a student, which add up to a big chunk of money that just is not covered by that study allowance. We do not know whether the independent youth allowance should actually be extended towards young people living such a long distance away from the area that they come from. That is one thing we talked about.

There is also a really large Koori population here. That is another whole different thing again. The connection to the family is incredibly strong. Some young people have some success in Melbourne, particular with the AFL. We often see those young people go to Melbourne to the AFL. John knows of a young person who this happened to —

he got into to an AFL club for a brief period of time but simply could not sustain it because of the pull to get back home to his family. It seems to happen quite commonly.

In our small communities we lack visible role models — people with degree-level qualifications — so young people do not have a concept of what is available to them. Their idea of what a career is and what the options may be are quite limited to perhaps some other young people who have greater access in Melbourne to those things. John, did we want to talk about some of these ideas?

Mr IRELAND — Probably just to move into some, I guess, not solutions but some thoughts. One of them you were discussing as we came in was the RMIT TAFE model. That has had a degree of success. I suppose I would preface any of these by saying I do not think there is one solution. I am sure that is not news to anybody here. The RMIT TAFE model means that for the first year of university they can do it and stay at home.

I actually believe that the answer is not to educate kids where they are. I think the university experience and the whole mind-broadening experience of getting out of your small community and going to a place of higher learning is important. I think distance education has a place, but it is not the only answer. It can be a part of the solution. I was actually sharing an office with the Monash facility down the road here when it happened, which is why Linda saw me nod at her when she said, ‘the mid-90s’. I believe it was the end of 1997 when it closed. That was basically a computer access point for young people. There was a support system. There was a degree of tutorial assistance that went on through there. I think it just closed because of economic considerations. That had the potential to go much further, but it did not. A little while after that RMIT stepped into the breach, and that was the tertiary offering in town. But there was quite a strong relationship with Monash Gippsland in the early 1990s.

I think the solution is somewhere in the combination of distance education, on-campus education here and ease of access to tertiary education in an on-campus university in a larger centre. Access to the independent youth allowance is difficult. It could be streamlined by setting an arbitrary, ‘If you are a bona fide student from outside — it does not mean your mum and dad have a holiday house at Lakes Entrance — but if you are actually a bona fide student who did not go to Melbourne Grammar with a holiday house in Lakes Entrance’, then access to an independent living allowance should be almost automatic because you must leave home. You must be able to support yourself.

I have no grief with a gap year as such. I said to Jacinta earlier that I would have killed for a gap year. When I left school I went straight to university; I did not have any choice. I would have loved to have a year to sit back and look at the world and get a life and make a few dollars. I started university broke, and I finished university broke. I have no grief with a gap year but in some cases it is not working for kids. I was talking about an example last night. It was brought up by Craig. There was a young man from Falls Creek who went into a five-year program at university. For various reasons the gap year was not appropriate, and the family, including the grandparents, were pooling their resources to support this kid. That is a terrible, terrible strain to put on a family, particularly when you consider that the earnings of people in East Gippsland are much, much lower than in the metropolitan area. In almost every aspect we are economically worse off, but we are the ones who have the extra burden to carry.

I think the independent youth allowance is critical, and a fairly serious accommodation allowance with that. I get the bills every month for my son’s accommodation, and I know that when he finally gets the independent living allowance, which will not happen until the end of the month, his whole allowance will not pay for it. His whole allowance will not equal what the accommodation is costing. His accommodation is not palatial. It is about the size of my dog’s kennel. Jacinta?

Ms CREALY — Okay. We have talked about the isolation of young people living in Melbourne and missing family and friends et cetera. Some of them who do not get onto campus and are boarding are still missing out on a support network to help them through. I am speaking a little bit out of turn because this is going back a couple of years. I was the coordinator of a mentoring program, and I attended an energise workshop which they had. It is a national gathering of mentoring programs from around Australia. There was a young lady there from Mildura who had set up a fantastic mentoring program for young people from Mildura who were going down and attending university, which targeted this isolation problem. They were training mentors in the Melbourne business community to mentor young people who had just moved down to Melbourne. They had had enormous success, and their drop-out rate from university was significantly lower. She was a bit of a stand-out, and everybody pricked up their ears and said, ‘Wow!’. I cannot tell you if it is still running, but it certainly sounded like a pretty good idea at

the time. That is something else worth thinking about. Mentoring in general, we have discovered, has been fantastic for kids in all areas of education, including this area of going to university.

Down the bottom we have support for the concept of a university campus being established in Sale, which is basically accessible for the East Gippsland young people. Even a little further down the line, an extra couple of hours on from Sale, becomes quite difficult. People do not actually understand the amount of kilometres annually. When you talk to local people and say, 'Why don't you send them down to Morwell or Traralgon?', and they will say, 'We do not know anyone in Morwell or Traralgon. Where are they going to live?'. It is not even just about Melbourne. It is even just a few hours down the track that people struggle to send their children. Sale is quite accessible. There is a lot of toing and froing between here and Sale.

Mr IRELAND — There is one more factor too that is involved in that, and that is transport. We are about to enter a new era with P-plates where young people will not be able to carry more than one other young person, which would militate really strongly against car pooling. It costs \$90 to fill up an average car these days. On a student's allowance, it just seems to be going against them. It might be worth throwing into the mix some concept of — —

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Exceptions.

Mr IRELAND — Yes, exceptions for young people who are bona fide students. Have a curfew, if you like them, but some concept of allowing this to happen without it being abused. I do not know how to do that; I am not a legislator. I could leave that to you perhaps.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Thank you, John and Jacinta, for such a detailed submission.

Mr HALL — Thanks first of all, John and Jacinta, for coming in and your perspectives on issues first-hand for our information. Perhaps for you first of all, John, in terms of accommodation in Melbourne, I know you and other parents of students in East Gippsland struggle with that issue of accommodation, because, as you have said quite rightly, apart from the limited range of courses available from RMIT TAFE, you have to live away from home — Churchill, Ballarat or Melbourne. To find accommodation in some of those places is difficult. What are the different alternatives available for parents of country students to find accommodation?

Mr IRELAND — I am not sure how hard it was, but my son got into Monash halls of residence in Clayton. I am not sure what the competition was like. He applied, he got it. He was not a brilliant student. He had an entry level of 80-something, not 90-something. I have a feeling that his rural education was a factor in that. I do not know if there is a proportion. I know that there are some people there who are not rural people, but I am not sure if there is a proportion of places kept for rural students in the halls of residence. I do not know how they work. But he had no trouble getting into that. My daughter is in the private rental sector, and that is difficult and getting more difficult. She is currently sharing a house with four other people; there are five in the house altogether. They have been very lucky, but the rents keep going up and up.

Mr HALL — It has been put to me that some kids have difficulty even getting a lease arrangement because they are students.

Mr IRELAND — I reckon they would. I think my kids have been very lucky. I have been a bit apprehensive every time their lease has finished and they have decided to move to somewhere else. I have been crossing my fingers that they would find somewhere and so far they have. This is my daughter's third flat in three years — for various reasons, mainly putting the rent up. Their lease comes up and the rent doubles and they think, 'This dump is not worth that', so they go and look for somewhere else.

Mr HALL — When you and I went to uni there used to be a range of hostel accommodation. They were very popular because it kept country kids together, so you had the same social contacts.

Mr IRELAND — It is that networking thing that is really important. With my daughter I was not so concerned because she went down with a group of kids from here and they set up this house. My son did not have the same social network, and we were apprehensive about exactly that phenomena I was talking about — of the lack of support kicking in and him giving up. So we opted to put him in the halls of residence.

Ms CREALY — Which would cost double, would you say?

Mr IRELAND — It would be close — a lot more.

Mr HALL — Jacinta, you touched on the other issue I was going to ask about. You spoke about your previous role in mentoring and the aspirational issues. There have probably been three sorts of issues raised with us: accessibility — that is, the transport; the economic issue; and the other is the aspirational issue. Certainly we need to, I think, lift the horizons for country students. They are just as good as city kids. They can do as well, they can achieve just as much, but it is not on their radar, using a phrase somebody used yesterday. So mentoring is one way. Are there other ways in which we can assist in lifting aspiration?

Ms CREALY — Prior to mentoring — it was actually my first job in East Gippsland — I was running the pilot of the career and transition program, which was a federal program. It has now merged into youth pathways. In that initial role I went around the secondary colleges here and did a lot of research about what young people's aspirations were, and also gave them a lot of information about what they could aspire to. It was kind of interesting, because they got lots of new information they did not have before. We were targeting year 8 and year 9, hoping that we would see by about year 10 some result from that. As it turns out with pilots, you never get that time frame to actually go back and see what has happened. So be it.

Anecdotally though, I have had parents come back to me from those initial year 8 kids and say, 'By the way, she has applied to become a sports scientist', which had not entered their minds at the time. I actually thought that that notion of really targeting that young, secondary-level area with career information and also looking at what they are capable of, was quite effective, or it appears to have been quite effective. A couple of the schools actually had all their year 8 students do that program.

From there we actually looked at mentoring. They kind of went hand-in-hand because there were those young people whose welfare issues were such that they really did not care what they were going to end up doing. They were the classic mentor-type people. We never have enough mentors for the young people who need them, but we have had fantastic success for the ones who have had them. They develop more aspiration just by having someone to talk to on a regular basis.

Mr DIXON — Some of the other country areas we visited had a community VCAL program for students.

Mr IRELAND — There are three in East Gippsland: one in Bairnsdale, one in Lakes Entrance and one in Orbost.

Mr DIXON — Are they working?

Mr IRELAND — I am fairly closely associated with all three of them. They have varying degrees of success and high points and low points but certainly the Bairnsdale one is the biggest, which would be obvious. I cannot think what his title was — Ivan New — he is the policeman for all of Gippsland. Superintendent, is it? I am not sure what the ranks are. I know he is not an inspector because that is local, so it must be superintendent. He attributed community VCAL in Bairnsdale almost being entirely responsible for an 80 per cent drop in casual street crime in Bairnsdale. He said that publicly on three occasions that I saw. They have had some remarkable success, the community-based VCALs.

Ms CREALY — There are two VCALs in Bairnsdale actually, because there is the one that is run through community college as well.

Mr IRELAND — There is also an on-campus one at the secondary college, the community VCALs, and the Changing Lanes program. So we have three of those. We have one in Lakes Entrance called SEEK and one in Orbost, which is called the community VCAL.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Thank you, John and Jacinta. You are welcome to stay for morning tea. I appreciate the submission.

Mr IRELAND — We have a hard copy of the submission here.

Witnesses withdrew.

CORRECTED VERSION

EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

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

Bairnsdale — 20 May 2008

Members

Mr M. Dixon

Mr N. Elasmarr

Mr P. Hall

Dr A. Harkness

Mr S. Herbert

Mr G. Howard

Mr N. Kotsiras

Chair: Mr G. Howard

Deputy Chair: Mr N. Kotsiras

Staff

Executive Officer: Ms K. Ellingford

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

Administrative Officer: Ms N. Tyler

Witnesses

Ms T. Wilson-Brown, Wulgulmerang;

Ms M. Barton, Bairnsdale;

Ms T. Linsen, W Tree.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — I declare this hearing of the Education and Training Committee open. The committee is hearing evidence today in relation to the inquiry into geographical differences in the rate in which Victorian students participate in higher education. I wish to advise that all evidence taken by the committee, including submissions, is subject to parliamentary privilege. Welcome to the parents. You have 15 minutes to make your submission and then we will have 15 minutes to ask you questions.

Ms WILSON-BROWN — My name is Traci Wilson-Brown. I live in Wulgulmerang, which is about 2 hours from Bairnsdale, in the Snowy Mountains. I have two children, and most of the community members around us who have children have the same sort of issues that we have, so I am really talking on behalf of our district rather than me personally. We are in a situation where our kids when they went to primary school went to a very small school — there were seven kids at the school, so their whole primary school life was this very tight little school. They went from there to a really large high school.

In order to access high school we had to move. So we live in two houses and have done now for the last six years. The options really when you get to high school are that either you move and support your kids through high school or if you happen to have family or someone you can board them with, your kids move and you stay where you are. To us that was not an option. I did not really want to give my kids up for the next six years while they did high school and went through puberty and all of that stuff. So we moved to Buchan, which is a kind of halfway solution, in that they can catch a bus from Buchan, which takes an hour and a half each way, and we can still work, because we are working back in the other direction. My husband can work from Wulgulmerang and I can work from Buchan; sometimes he can work from Buchan. We have a very schizophrenic life. We are living in two houses and everything is always in the wrong one. We can commute one way and the kids can commute the other. So at least we are all there at night together and we can support the kids when they are having traumas.

After school things are very difficult because there is no other bus back to Buchan. The only public transport to Buchan is three days a week. During the day it leaves at about 9 o'clock in the morning from Buchan and it returns to Buchan at about 5 o'clock at night, so it is a one-down, one-up, and does not have an after-school service. It leaves before school finishes, so there is no option of them doing after-school things unless we can come and pick them up from Bairnsdale.

When they get to uni this gets even more complicated. There is absolutely no option for them to stay in Wulgulmerang, or Buchan, and go to uni, because there is no transport to uni. I have one daughter in Churchill, who is doing nursing. She is up to her second year of nursing. In the first year she lived in res and hated it. She wanted to live in a house and spent three or four months trying to find a house that she could lease and coordinate people to lease with. It all ended up falling through. She could not find one that would accept her because she did not have a rental history, it was very hard to get references, and all those things, so at the last minute she actually ended up back in res. By then they had filled all of the houses and she got into the one they were filling at the time. She started out with two Indian guys, and by the time they filled the house there were two Indians, a Sri Lankan, a Chinese guy and a Japanese guy. She is the only girl. So she has come from this little tiny school in Gelantipy with seven kids, and now she is in this great big uni in Churchill living with five guys who do not speak English as their first language. So it is difficult. It is really quite hard for her to have much support. The only way she can get home is by car, because the public transport just does not work. If you are going from Churchill to Melbourne, there is a train from Morwell every hour. It is 10 minutes to get by car to Morwell. There is a bus that generally misses the train by about 3 minutes. If you want to come this way, you cannot catch it from Morwell, you have to get to Traralgon. And then there is a train three times a day that does not ever really fit with when your last lecture happened or anything else. So she drives, which means we have to support her with a car as well.

Because we both work in order to have two houses and do all that, she does not get youth allowance or Austudy, and because she does not get youth allowance or Austudy she seems not to be eligible for any scholarships at all because they seem to be income-based. If you do not get Austudy, you do not even apply because that is the first thing: 'Do you get Austudy? No? Don't bother reading on'. There was one that looked hopeful. This is our application. There are about 12 certified copies of everything known to man — tax returns, birth certificates and proof that you went to a little country school, because it was for rural and remote isolated kids to do nursing. Perfect! But there were 110 or so of those things. They did not say, 'Do not bother applying if you are not getting Austudy', they said 'No, apply anyway, you might get it, because we will just give it to the poorest kids first'. But when they got to their 110 they just ruled a line, and to everyone else it was just 'No, sorry'. So, guess what? — 'No, sorry.' That is kind of our issue. We have a second daughter who is in year 12 and potentially I would love her to do a tertiary course but I do not know how we can afford two lots of kids living away from home. The course

that she is probably most likely to do will not be available in Churchill or Bairnsdale or anywhere locally, so she is probably going to have to live in Melbourne, and I do not know how we are going to afford rents in Melbourne for her to do that, and support her for another three years while we still have another one at uni, and I know if she defers, that will be it; she probably will not go back.

That is a fairly common sort of thread. It is hard for them to get any parental support when petrol is very expensive for them to come back. It is a long way to come back. From Churchill to Wulgulmerang you are talking about 5 hours drive, at \$1.50 a litre, so it is a very expensive commute to get home, and she would get home twice a year, if we are lucky. Mostly she will go to Bairnsdale; she will not come as far as home. They are kind of our issues.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Thanks, Traci.

Ms LINSEN — My name is Tam Linsen. I live at W Tree, which is about 25 kilometres north of Buchan — not quite as far as Traci. Traci and I happen to work with each other in W Tree. I suppose I am here representing all of the parents of W Tree. We have got a very large community of young children. We have had a struggle to get a bus to collect the high school kids to take them to Buchan to meet the high school bus, and we have been lucky with the Department of Infrastructure being able to get that running this year because we have only got about three more to go through into primary school, and then all of the kids will be in primary school and going on into high school. There is a big population boom. It is a very attractive area for families and very much a lifestyle choice to live there, but by the same token we just feel that opportunities for our children should still be there.

I grew up between Sale and Bairnsdale. I deferred my first year of university. I went up to Dinner Plain in the snow, had a wonderful life, did a lot of work, then had to put myself through college in Melbourne. After a year I thought, ‘This is ridiculous! What am I doing? I could be earning so much more money instead of being broke’. I was at William Angliss doing hotel management. With the hotel management course we had to be at the college a couple of nights a week to run the restaurant and the kitchen, and they were the choice nights for working in any restaurant in Melbourne, so therefore you could not get work in a restaurant in your industry because the two choice nights were taken up with your college course.

So in the end it just got too expensive for me. I threw it in, ran back up to the snow, where I had already been assistant manager of a hotel, where I could work and earn decent money, and I would just go from there. A few times I have attempted to go back to do study, but I think once kids defer that is it; I really do. It is so hard to go back to being poor after you know what money is like. We do have a lot of children who have already grown up in our area and moved through to university. I know one who has completed an apprenticeship and one who went through university, out of five kids who have been raised up there. Most of them drop out for financial reasons and just the struggle. Our children are raised in a very idealistic lifestyle, it is a beautiful area, it is very supportive. All the families are a community. We all look after each other’s children; we are a very strong community in that regard. And the kids go off to Melbourne and they just fall apart. They get there and there is no support. They cannot just drop next door for some advice. There is no-one there for them. When I speak to those kids they say, ‘What is there for us in Melbourne?; there is nothing for us here’. I do not want that for my kids.

Ms BARTON — Thank you for the opportunity. I am Margie Barton. I was just sitting there really as a mother but I certainly have been thinking about the issues a lot since I heard about the inquiry, and I have written a submission but I am going to tweak it a little now. I will go through it roughly. I am the mother of two students currently attending university in Melbourne and our third child is in year 12 this year and hopes to study environmental science. Having been to the careers counsellor on Friday I found that it is not just the three-year undergraduate course, you actually need then to do two years of masters, and to be employed in environmental science you will need a PhD. We thought we were looking at three or four years, but we are actually looking at probably seven or eight now for this last one. We are in the thick of all these issues. I have also been a mentor to various students at Bairnsdale Secondary College over the years in these various areas of career and life choices for students who wanted to look into veterinary science, or there was a student who was a musician, who could have gone a long way with that, had she had the encouraging family support to push her a bit further.

I consider there are two major areas of inequity regarding higher education in rural areas — well, probably several. The first several are financial; I think the major issues are financial. The second issue is emotional or psychological, for these students. Financially, obviously the students here have to live away from home unless they want to do a course offered here, and those are limited, as we have discussed. Private rental in the city is prohibitively

expensive, and, I might add, impossible to get. My daughter spent six to seven weeks over this summer break, when she could have been here earning money — she had to put off shifts to go and find housing in Melbourne — because she was in college for the first two years and chose to move out because of all those freshers who were going to be coming in. We actually applied in our own names to rent a house on her behalf after seven weeks because term had already started and she had nowhere to live except on the floor of a friend of ours. We applied in our names and within 24 hours we were offered two houses. The same for our son, who had a rental history, but again the market is such that it is impossible to rent a place privately. Consequently my husband and I are currently the tenants of two places in Melbourne. We are running three households, including our own here, and as of next year we will be running four households. That is expensive.

Living in at college is a possibility but it is also an expensive possibility; it is no cheaper, and there is huge competition for those places. I know that the colleges my daughter applied for had no requisite number of rural students. I know they have 50 per cent of international students, and I understand that they need them at universities these days to actually pay costs, but there were virtually no places put aside for rural students at the colleges. Students can earn money while they are at university, but reasonable employment is hard to find. A lot of the jobs my kids have done down there have been cash jobs, which is also illegal. They are not covered with WorkCover and so on, but they are the jobs that they are being offered and the hours that they are having to work. Some of the courses have prohibitively long hours. If you are studying medicine, dentistry — all of those courses that really take a lot of time in face-to-face teaching — you do not have the time for that, and ideally you would be putting that time, if you did have it, into your studies, not into working as a waitress.

Students who live in their own houses also have a lot of domestic chores, which take up a lot of time. They have to pay their own bills, they have to do their own cooking, cleaning, washing and so on. My daughter used to ring me in her first year at uni and said in the whole class of 40 or so in one of her subjects there was one mature aged student and the rest of them were living at home with their parents. She said, ‘Mum, they get their washing done, they get meals; their parents drop them at uni and pick them up again’, and the difference between her life down there and their lives was huge.

Deferral is an interesting thing. My oldest son deferred, and I can see your point — that it is very hard to get back to it. In his case he was booked in to do a bachelor of science majoring in neuropsychology and he is now a student at the Victorian College of the Arts studying singing. So there was a big change in what he wanted to do, and possibly deferral was a good year for him for that.

Emotionally the rural students moving to cities, as we have said, miss out on the support of family and friends. It is incredibly isolating, and that is at a time — my daughter was 17 when she went to uni — when they are very vulnerable anyway, these young adults, let alone with all these changes in their lives. My oldest son suffered from depression in his first year, which thankfully he has not suffered from again, but he had never shown any signs of anything like that before.

I certainly know friends of theirs who have come back to Bairnsdale because they could not cope with life down there, I know friends of theirs who have turned to drugs and alcohol, and I really think that is a means of trying to cope with that isolation, and we do not want to encourage that. And they are the students who have had the courage and the ability to actually go to Melbourne to study.

The whole debate comes down to a question of limitations, and the choice of careers for our youth is very limited if you stay here. We want our students, some of them, to be studying things like medicine, dentistry and so on — the skills that are missing in rural areas. So we want them to go away, we want them to have the university experience when they go away too, but it is very difficult. I had a few ideas, probably naive ones, that may help. I feel strongly that there should be more tax breaks for parents who are supporting students who have to leave home to study at a tertiary level, and again, as John was saying, it is hard to decide who has to and who does not have to move away.

I do not think student living allowances should be based on the fact that the student has earned \$18 000-plus in that 18-month period. There are lots of ways of getting around that, and we have discussed all of those amongst ourselves at morning tea — not that we do them. But there are ways of getting around it, and I suspect the wrong students are being supported. I think geographic isolation should be a no. 1 consideration when giving student living allowances out. Maybe rural students should have free public transport when they are studying in Melbourne.

Maybe they should have free transport to come home again on the train, if they can actually get home on public transport. It costs a lot to come on the train and go back again. It costs more to drive. Again, I am worried about the new P-plate rules. At the moment my daughter organises four people in a car and they pay \$10 each for petrol, but it is not going to be able to happen for my son, who will be getting his P-plates at the end of the year.

Adequate funding for educational bodies for greater preparation and support for moving away from home starts off in secondary schools. There should be some support there of what to expect when you move away from home. I know there are some courses run. Also in tertiary institutions, with the lack of funding now for the union bodies especially, there are not the supports there used to be there when I was at university. You went to the student university housing person, and they would really help. There would be lots of people there helping you to find housing, but there are not any more.

There is one person, and maybe they have got three flats on their books. And all those university clubs and so on, which helped students feel that sort of community support once they got down there — there is very little of that happening anymore. Orientation week — there is very little funding there, even when you first go there, to get you in and help you make friends.

Possibly we could concentrate the courses a bit more. My daughter has a course where she has 12 hours each week of face-to-face lectures, and it is over. She has a lot of holidays over the summer where she does earn money. If courses could be concentrated a bit more, it might be an idea, I reckon.

It is a hackneyed phrase, but these people are our future, and we want our youth from regional areas especially to study a wide range of courses. It is a sad fact that rural living at present means that many of our youth will never reach their potential or fulfil their dreams because they do not have the financial means and some of them do not have the personal support to do so. Thank you.

Mr HALL — First of all, thank you all for coming along and presenting your story. It leaves a more lasting impression on us than a theoretical concept, so thank you for coming in personally and giving us that story. In terms of achieving a reasonable balance of opportunity, which I think are the words that you used, Margie, for our students who live in isolated areas, you can realistically look at what future options are available: Bairnsdale has a very limited range of higher education programs available; Sale is looking to try and attract a university presence there; Churchill is our closest one but even Churchill, as you said, is really in some respects not a lot different to Melbourne, particularly when you have the travel arrangements. Realistically, when you are talking about the future for Bairnsdale and Sale, although there are limited opportunities there, they are never going to accommodate the opportunity of choice that you would like for your kids. So am I right in assuming that while anything provided locally would enhance opportunity, the real issues, from isolated parents' point of view, is the financial support to enable kids to study in Melbourne?

Ms WILSON-BROWN — Definitely, and for them to be able to come home and get parental support. I know that with the limited amount with which we can actually financially support our kids, she can live, she can get by, she can eat, but things like coming all the way home are next to impossible. She just cannot afford that much petrol; it is such a rare thing. And I will pay for petrol so she can get home when I can afford it, but there is no travelling allowance.

When they are in secondary school there is a federal allowance called the AIC (assistance for isolated children), which assists you in either maintaining a second home or boarding. It is not a travelling allowance as such, unless you are on a bus where you have to travel further than a normal bus. The minute they hit tertiary — unless they are 16, if they are doing a TAFE course or something, doing tertiary — that cuts out. So when our oldest student went from secondary to tertiary, we went from having two lots of isolated children's assistance, which paid the rent in Buchan, to one, but we had accommodation at uni as well, and nothing to support that at all.

Mr HALL — There is no similar program for tertiary students?

Ms WILSON-BROWN — Yes, it would be to continue that isolated assistance scheme on to tertiary students who have to move away from home to access university. There are pretty strict criteria about that — you have to be a certain distance from school. I think you could use a similar set of criteria. I know it is federal and not state, but that would make a huge difference, having something like that, and perhaps having a travel allowance from their home or free public transport if there is any. That sort of thing would really assist.

Mr HALL — Is online learning any use?

Ms WILSON-BROWN — It is a little bit except that they still need to be at uni for some things, so they still need the accommodation and they still need to physically be there. Some students can travel down just for one day, and that is probably a good thing if they are a distance away where they can actually feasibly commute there and back in one day. For Bec to do that from home, she is looking at 10 hours of driving to get to the closest university to us, then drive back. So it is not feasible to do that in one day. You still have to have accommodation.

I have talked to her about next year, when she has got more placements and stuff. Maybe you pay day by day; but if she does pay day by day, she has to move in and out each day. She cannot leave her room set up and come and just stay there three nights a week. As it is, she is only there probably four nights a week but she still has to pay for seven. If she was doing some of it online, she would still have to have a room set up down there or be moving in and out every time she goes.

Ms BARTON — If I could just add too, I think there is more to university life and tertiary study than the actual subject you are studying. For instance my daughter is doing a visual arts degree, and there are all the galleries and there are things happening in Melbourne — apart from just growing up and your life. Becoming an adult, I think, is very important, and you cannot do it online. So subjects online are one thing, but I think we want our children, a lot of them, if it is appropriate, to go away to study but we just cannot afford it.

Mr HALL — You need that financial support?

Ms BARTON — Yes.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Do you think the ENTER score is fair? Should perhaps students in regional and rural Victoria receive an extra bonus on their ENTER score?

Ms BARTON — There is some provision made for geographic isolation, I think.

Ms WILSON-BROWN — It is 2 per cent, I think.

Ms LINSEN — Some of the institutions do make that but not across the board.

Ms BARTON — But there are only a few places available at RMIT. I know in Melbourne there are a few places but not enough, and it is a big difference. Again, in that very narrow field if you are studying fine art or arts, it is an overnight trip to go to a gallery in Melbourne. It is a huge difference. I do not think there is enough provision made, no.

Ms WILSON-BROWN — I have mixed feelings about the ENTER score. One feeling is that it is actually very hard to get a really good ENTER score in a country school. If our kids were going to MacRob., you would know that they would all be getting in the 90s, and here, getting over an 80 is a really good ENTER score. It is like, 'You got over 80, that is really good!'. And the percentage of kids that get over 80 would be much lower than some city schools that they do not have access to. But at the same time, if you wanted to do medicine, if you did not have that ENTER score, would you cope with medicine? Or would you get there and just bomb out because you do not have the background behind you to actually be able to cope with a course that is at that level?

In some ways, while there is a concession already of a couple of points, I think, in a lot of courses I think in some ways it is good for kids. Bec needed only 70 to get in. She seriously wanted to get into a double degree at Churchill to do rural nursing, and she worked her butt off and got 81 or something. She only needed 72 and so their reaction was, 'Are you sure this is what you want to do?' and she said, 'Yes!'. I think it is good for them to have to say, 'This is what I want to do', and aim for it, aim higher than it, to make sure they get it, because it is very hard to work out what ENTER score you are going to get when you get the piece of paper at the end.

I do not actually have a problem with them aiming high, and I think it is good that there is a bit of a concession because it is harder to get a high ENTER score in those schools than it is in Melbourne.

Ms BARTON — Sorry to interrupt: by the same token, kids who achieve well at our schools in this area achieve very well at university if they stay there, because they are motivated and they are self-directed learning kind of people, and I imagine the figures back that up; the few I have seen do. So I think it would be good to have a

bit of loading on the ENTER scores for isolation, because they are going to achieve at uni, I believe; I have seen evidence of that.

Mr DIXON — Just a quick question, which, I suppose, is rather theoretical. In a perfect world in which money was not an object — one of you mentioned that Melbourne and the idea of living in the city is just so far away — is it a worthwhile long-term project that your children and other children like them have exposure to Melbourne and get down there through school excursions, from primary school and secondary school and all of that, just to get a bit of a taste?

Ms BARTON — Hugely valuable. I think there should be a lot more of it. Certainly the students I mentored — some of them had never been further towards Melbourne than Sale. It seems astonishing to us in these days, but that is pretty common. And that is a huge step. That is like going to the moon for us, or South America, the Amazon. It is just unbelievable that they would travel further west. In the primary schools most of them go to Melbourne for a week or something, and that may be the only time kids ever see Melbourne.

Ms LINSEN — When they do that trip they will go with other small schools from the region. For example, Buchan Primary School will go with Tubbut, which has four children at the moment. They will all go together so that those grade 6 kids can then network, get to know each other, before they then go to a large school such as 'seco' here in Bairnsdale or Nagle, so they can actually start forming some friendships and relationships. That is a very important trip, but it is one trip.

Mr DIXON — That is right. It has got to be more than once, yes.

Ms BARTON — And it does not happen in secondary school. And one of the reasons, too, is the lack of hostels, which you were talking about earlier. It used to be cheaper to stay, but it is very hard to find somewhere cheap to stay in Melbourne now that is secure enough to take a school group.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Thank you very much. It is always good to get firsthand information and what better way than to meet the parents. So thank you very much for taking the time to come all the way down. We appreciate it.

Witnesses withdrew.

CORRECTED VERSION

EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

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

Bairnsdale — 20 May 2008

Members

Mr M. Dixon

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Mr N. Kotsiras

Chair: Mr G. Howard

Deputy Chair: Mr N. Kotsiras

Staff

Executive Officer: Ms K. Ellingford

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Witness

Mr R. Boucher, principal, Swifts Creek Secondary College.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Robert, welcome. Thank you for coming to give evidence. You have 10 minutes to make a presentation and then we will ask you questions.

Mr BOUCHER — Thank you. I am here from a secondary school with the principal's hat on but I am also here as a parent who has four kids, one of them currently in year 12. But then I am also here with the chairperson's hat on from the career teachers group from East Gippsland so I have a little bit to cover in 10 minutes.

Firstly, just listening to what was presented beforehand, there is some history of schools in the east going okay in term of ENTER scores. As you are aware, no doubt, we had a kid last year who got an ENTER score of 99.25. The year before I think we were in the top three in terms of median study scores, and the year before that I think Cann River was. So there is potential for small schools in the east to deliver the ENTER scores so that kids can go off and be successful.

One of the big things that is lacking in my community is the role models for kids to look around and see older people with tertiary education so that they can then come back and be one of them. When we have companies moving their offices out of the area, and those people who had tertiary qualifications moving out of the town, kids and parents equate that with, 'If you get a piece of paper, you cannot come back.' So when we work so hard at building up a sense of belonging and a sense of community through the sporting clubs and things, there are some students who question whether that is the pathway they want to follow.

There are some mixed messages that are being sent out to some of our young people, and the biggest one is: when you get your ticket, where are you going to end up? A lot of really good work has gone on with the state government money, the MIPs (managing individual pathways) money. We now have kids that are very clear about the pathway they want to follow, and they are taking up the options of apprenticeships and traineeships and being successful with those. So as much as there is concern with kids not going on to tertiary, there also needs to be some recognition that we have a population where not everybody wants to go there, and we are having kids being successful in their chosen fields.

For me as a parent I am lucky at the moment because my big boy is saying he wants to go into the defence forces. So I am thinking, 'Beauty, I do not have to come up with a whole heap of dough'. But on the other hand that letting go is going to be even more difficult than if he were to move away to Melbourne. So many parents are going through that same issue of not just the financial cost, but that emotional feeling of, 'They are gone; they will not be popping around for tea during the week; I cannot just check and make sure everything is going okay'.

When I first moved to Swifts Creek in 1998 we had a night for the boys in year 12, and one of the parents there gave me some advice. He said the great thing about living in a small community is that you get to know your kids really well, you get to do things with them that you never get the chance to do in bigger places, but then the kids up and leave when they turn 18, and as a parent that is the hardest thing you have to deal with. He said, 'You had better start planning for it now'.

At school we are very conscious of preparing the students for the next phase of their lives. Our year 7 induction starts with, 'It won't be long and they will be gone'. We have been providing them with opportunities to get out and about and see what is out there. But that is not enough. We need the role models in the local community where kids can see that that is what a surveyor does — I have to go to uni to become a surveyor. I can do that. At the moment those role models do not exist and until that happens, we will not have overcome that.

We have had a number of kids who have gone off to tertiary and made the move very successfully. They have done their time in Melbourne, they have come back to Bairnsdale, and Bairnsdale is supporting them in their profession. One of those kids actually took up the course that RMIT offered here. So those courses that are provided in East Gippsland do make a difference. They are significant. But we need to see a few more. It would be really nice if our little cohorts, as they go through, could be connected together a little more.

We have a group of kids at year 12 this year, and there is one female in there. It is a tough gig for her. How do we overcome the isolation? The only way I can see us overcoming that is through the use of technology. That technology then provides opportunities for those who are ready to access tertiary education. If they do not wish to do it that way and they are ready to actually take the step and head down to Monash or Melbourne or wherever it is, then they are prepared for it because they have been mixing with a wider range of people.

The significant thing for us as a group of careers teachers working together is that we have very different contexts in which we are working. We are working together to ensure every one of the kids who is in our care gets the very best advice, and so there is a wealth of material which comes in from the tertiary providers. We use that to ensure that our kids get the very best advice in terms of scholarships, get encouraged to pursue courses where they will have the greatest chance of success. If, out of this, we can not see more tertiary provision in the east, perhaps we need to see more tertiary provision in other rural locations, where there is a very clear scheme running across all providers, about the ENTER requirements.

We had a discussion earlier about whether the ENTER is a fair measurement, and I am happy to say it is not, and that needs to be looked at. The numbers I said at the start — I probably should not have said that — but that is the reality. And it is a reflection of the really good work that is going on in many good schools with students, parents and the teaching staff. In all of that, we need to be careful that we are supporting the really important relationships, but setting the high expectations. And that is the challenge for us in our school community — setting high expectations when mum and dad are choosing to live where they have, sometimes because of family history, sometimes because they are looking to move away from challenges of living in bigger centres.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Can I start off with your role in the careers team? Are you getting enough support from the department in terms of upskilling, getting to go to PDs, to learn more about the changes that are occurring, scholarships that are available — are you getting that support?

Mr BOUCHER — That is a great question. The idea of working in the east is, if you want to attend courses or PDs in Melbourne, you have to commit yourself to two days out of your place. If you are doing that and you are at Bairnsdale Secondary College, and you have 200 kids in year 12, you are not going to be doing that. For me in my role, because I am a principal, I can just go. The more support we get, the better we will be at the job, but I am happy to say that the level of support is okay.

One of the great things about coming together as a group of careers teachers and talking about what is going on is that you actually get a chance to learn from one another, and if anything, it would be nice to see perhaps a greater emphasis on the need for that network tasking more often.

Mr DIXON — Robert, what are your views on online learning, whether it is in the secondary context or tertiary, especially where you are not just thrown in the deep end, but where there is support and study centres and what have you? Is that an option?

Mr BOUCHER — We actually had a go at it a few years ago with VET provision for hospitality. We had a teacher working with the kids. We took the kids down during the holidays to do the practical component of it, and it was a disaster. They did not like having to go down there during their holidays; they wanted to know what it all meant. They actually wanted a real person. They wanted someone they could talk to, and going from a kid to an adult it is so important that they have an adult figure they can talk to; it might be about the cooking but it might be about a whole lot of other stuff. That is the thing that, yes, online provides something, but I do not think it is the total answer.

I like the idea of using technology to link kids in the different communities for some social interaction. I have got a 15 year old who cannot watch television unless she has got the phone in her hand and she is texting. For us, if we did not have those fires in 2003, we would not have got the mobile phones but it has been terrific because it has actually enabled kids. With the geography of our school we have got kids from the other side of Benambra, the other side of Ensay and they can be fairly spread apart. For them to get together on weekends is very difficult but they can through the phone and the texting which is cheap and it is not mum on the phone. The next step is the online stuff.

Mr DIXON — What about videoconferencing, I know it has got a long way to go, is that the same?

Mr BOUCHER — Actually with video conferencing our kids have said, ‘Don’t like it’ because the technology is not reliable and so when there is the situation of, ‘Yes, we will listen to that class being delivered’, there was a time delay.

The other reality is trying to coordinate across seven schools’ timetables. In the east we have not got classes running for the same length within the secondary colleges. There is that really simple difference so when it gets a little bit more sophisticated, yes it will be good.

Mr ELASMAR — Robert, thank you again for coming. You mentioned that as a student there was a high score of 99.3. What happened if that school did not have the support financially? You would have deferred going to university? Is there any plan by your college for students with the high scores so they do not defer?

Mr BOUCHER — Every chance we got with that particular kid we would encourage support, anything that would help his financial situation. One of the things that our school is quite lucky with is we are involved in a program called the student work program where the kids are encouraged to go into part-time work and through some agreement we are able to subsidise that employment through the program. Craig will tell you more about it, but the great thing is that that student actually developed his own little business and so in terms of finances it was not an issue for him. For other kids who have done very well, we have certainly been very active in supporting them with scholarship applications and we have had a pretty good success rate.

Mr HALL — Thanks, Rob, for coming down, we appreciate it. Given the fact that, as you said, there are few tertiary jobs in town — few jobs for people with tertiary qualifications — does that affect the aspirations of kids at Swifts Creek Secondary College?

Mr BOUCHER — Absolutely, so when there are some positions which could be connected with the shire they do not necessarily have to remain at Bairnsdale. It would be quite easy for some of those positions to be located up the road. And the more we actually look to the value that the little communities can add and think about where we locate people, the richer the Victorian community will be.

Mr HALL — Give us a snapshot of the outcome from education out of Swifts Creek Secondary College. Where do kids who have gone through your school end up?

Mr BOUCHER — Last year, of our three kids who did year 12, one boy has picked up an apprenticeship with a local builder, Pete is down at Monash Clayton doing law and aeronautics, and the other student is working locally and looking to getting into some TAFE courses next year when she is ready to make the move.

Quite a few of our kids will chase apprenticeships, so that means they are moving away, but that is what they are wanting to do, so we support them to do that. There are a percentage of kids who start off with us and at the end of year 8 they will go off to the private sector. I have been there since 1998, and I reckon we have had about eight kids pick up apprenticeships locally, and I am talking Omeo–Swifts Creek. The rest of them have had to move down to Bairnsdale.

We usually have one or two kids out of each year level go on to tertiary and for some of them that is straight out of year 12. Some of them will take a break. Currently from the 2006 group, of the six who did that, we have got 1 here doing the commerce course, 1 doing first year nursing at RMIT, 1 at Bundoora doing OT, 1 at Deakin doing sports and 1 working.

Mr HALL — That is about 60 per cent or more of the kids have gone on to higher education?

Mr BOUCHER — Yes, different cohorts, and so one of the real interesting statistics for us is looking at the year 7 to year 12 retention rates. In those, there are some pretty interesting stories about population shifts and what that means. Families are looking at it and saying, ‘We have not got the opportunity here, we have got to move away’. That then makes it harder to raise aspirations and have those role models, and we have other kids looking around and saying, ‘I would not mind doing a tertiary degree because I can come back’.

Mr HALL — Finally, if you were one of us sitting on this side of the table, what would you say is the single best thing that we could recommend to help kids from Swifts Creek Secondary College?

Mr BOUCHER — The best thing you can do is steal the army concept and say that you are going to provide a gap year for students working in government departments and say, ‘You can work with DSE for 12 months and at the end of the time there will be some recognition of that in some sort of certificate’, but more importantly the kids have actually earned some money and they have been able to stay in their own town, grow up a little bit and decide whether they want to go.

But if you do not like that idea, the other idea could be that local businesses who are based in a rural location actually pay less tax so that they can then employ more people, they can then maybe think about how much they

diversify their business. Then we get the local role models coming in because we then have people based in the bush with a high school base, who will say, 'I would like to get a tertiary qualification'.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Robert, thank you again for making the 100 kilometre journey to Bairnsdale; I understand you will stay for the next part as well?

Mr BOUCHER — Yes.

Witness withdrew.

CORRECTED VERSION

EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

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

Bairnsdale — 20 May 2008

Members

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

Chair: Mr G. Howard
Deputy Chair: Mr N. Kotsiras

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Witnesses

Mr R. Boucher, principal, Swifts Creek Secondary College;
Mr C. Sutherland, principal, and
Mr A. Symons, post-compulsory programs coordinator, Lakes Entrance Secondary College;
Ms F. Haldane, senior campus principal, and
Ms S. Monahu, careers officer, Bairnsdale Secondary College;
Ms L. Healey, managed individual pathways coordinator, and
Ms K. Hodge, later years manager, Maffra Secondary College;
Mr T. Barton, careers coordinator, Orbost Secondary College;
Ms J. Taylor, pathways coordinator, Catholic College Sale.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — I welcome you all to this inquiry. Martin, Peter, Nazih and I are former teachers from different fields. I would like to hear from all of you at some stage so I would appreciate it if you could make it short. At the end we will ask you some questions. Who will start?

Ms HALDANE — I am from Bairnsdale Secondary College, which is a school of about 1150 students and a large provider of secondary education. This is Sue Monahu, who is our careers counsellor. We have three groups of students who we see as having difficulties in taking up tertiary education. There are those who do not apply just because they simply cannot even contemplate the costs and/or they are not emotionally ready to go. There are those two aspects of it. We have a percentage of kids each year who do not apply to go away and that is okay; low aspirations are part of that.

We are successful in getting our kids out to work in apprenticeships. We had over 45 apprenticeships awarded during last year. We do cater for a wide range of students and we realise that, but we also cater for very academically talented students as well. They are the ones who we probably feel for the most, particularly the kids out of the middle class who probably do not receive any government support whatsoever. They are not eligible for youth allowance. If they do go away to tertiary study they are wholly supported by their parents. Of those kids, probably a third or more defer so that they can earn their \$18 000 to become independent so that they are not quite such a financial burden on their parents. Some of those never actually take up their places, and I guess they are the ones that we do really feel for.

There are those who do go, who incur enormous financial burden. Like Rob, I am a parent, I have just supported two students through two undergraduate degrees over the last four years. I got my husband to do the sums the other day, knowing I was coming here. Extra, over and above what we would have paid to have kids living at home, at a university there was no change out of \$100 000, and that is no HECS fees or anything like that. That is just what it cost to support them to live in Melbourne.

The other issue we have, of those who do accept offers, there is a significant dropout rate in the first few months, by country kids because they get there and they find it is expensive to live and a lack of social supports — that is why the university colleges are really important for kids to be able to attend because they have those inbuilt social supports. If you put a kid in a flat with new social relationships and setting up house and a new learning setting, the risks are doubled or tripled, whereas if you can put them into a university-supported college the kids have more success. That is also important, that they need to have those support networks around them when they do make the move.

Ms MONAHU — I would just support what Frances said that it is really the middle group of students where our heart goes out to them because they really cannot afford to even consider university. They have got the potential, they have got the motivation, they have got the desire, but the financial assistance from their family is just not there. The parents might very well just tip over the threshold for gaining any support at all and therefore the full cost falls to the parents to support them. Like Frances, I have supported two of my student children through university and there is not much change out of \$100 000. In fact I think that would be fairly conservative. You are not including HECS on top of that.

Talking to my son last night, knowing again that I was coming here today, one of the factors that he said was that the support that they get from university is lacking. They are one person in a sea of many thousands and just having that ongoing mentoring from someone who is from the town or a person that they can contact is extremely useful. Whether that is a relative of the family or somebody who has gone to the school that they were from, it just makes that little bit of difference where they can feel comfortable, they have got someone to talk to and they settle much better, but we do see, about mid-year first year, a lot of them are drifting back because they have not made a successful transition.

Mr SYMONS — I think the big issue for us is to actually get the students to want to do tertiary education. Our circumstance is a little bit different from other schools because we never used to have year 11 and 12 and we always thought, 'We have got no senior students, we have got no role models' and there was always that lack of desire. They did not seem to value education and now that we have our got full-fee VCE — we have had that for three years now — what we are finding is, like last year we had 15 VCE students, they all got through but of the five who got good results in the mid-70s or something like that, none have gone to university this year: two have gone to TAFE, one did not apply, and the other two just deferred.

When I asked — I have already asked this year's cohort who are similar in ability — 'Why aren't you thinking of uni?', they all said, 'I cannot afford it', and that is the end of the story, they do not even want to discuss it. Some of them are middle class, some are from struggling families, some are from well-to-do families. Across the range there it is just the perception that it is too expensive, the HECS fees intimidate them, particularly the cost of accommodation when they move away. They are quite happy just to stay around Lakes, working at the local takeaway or supermarket or some of that sort of short-term employment. Some will eventually move away but what they want to do is get some money together and then they make the move down to the Valley, to Melbourne or beyond. That is the biggest challenge for us to try to convince them it is worth having aspirations to tertiary education, but it is that lack of aspiration right now which is our biggest challenge, I think.

Mr BARTON — I have been a careers teacher at Orbost for about 20 years and I have also three of my own kids at university at the moment. We have done a fairly detailed response, and I was wondering if I could just go through and pick out a couple of points mentioned in the criteria.

The first criteria talked about the variations in the number and type of applications. We feel we are disadvantaged when students are competing for the highest end of the ENTER range. There is an exponential rise when you get over a certain degree of difficulty and it is something that needs to be looked at in Victoria. Here (in Orbost) one of my students applied for medicine in Victoria, got in the low 90s and it did not look likely that she could get a Victorian offer. She had three interstate offers and has taken one up because they have programs for rural students to study medicine in Queensland and New South Wales. She is up at the University of Sydney at the moment and loving it.

The next point was the influences of retention rates. We have got a big VET program up there: 100 of our students from a cohort of 300 do a VET subject, and that has certainly increased our retention, which is one of our objectives. Some of those retention rates are high because at times it could be we are having trouble getting kids into the trades locally, often if they want apprenticeships and come down this way they are of the sort of background where they are not ready to move away until they have got a licence and a car, unlike the students who want to go to uni, who are of a totally different mind set.

The retention rates of course are an objective but by the same token they do water down some of the stimulus and the competition of the cohorts — they break down study scores and ENTERs (of the tertiary aspirants). I do not think there is any other nice way of saying that.

Girls at our school outnumber boys, probably three to one, in applying for university and accepting places, and they invariably get higher ENTER scores. Most of our boys who go through to year 12 are not university oriented, maybe one or two a year, but often look at the trades, and that is something that we just have to keep working on because a lot of boys with ability are not going.

The geographic location is a problem, being 380 kilometres away, and that has been recognised. Our school has been part of the Disadvantaged Schools Program, Country Education Project, and commonwealth scholarship programs, Linked by post code. This year 50 per cent of our kids are on EMA or youth allowance, and that probably says something about it being a very working class culture within the school. Universities do recognise this with a degree of special entry schemes, and I have talked about that a little more further on.

We have worked really hard to get our kids to accept that they have to move away if they want to study. Probably 30 to 40 per cent of our kids each year will move away to go to university or TAFE — 30-something per cent went to uni last year. We believe the role of the careers teacher is fairly important for a number of reasons. The special equity and access scheme (SEAS), I suppose, is meant to streamline and simplify special admission schemes and applications for scholarships. In fact for people who are not very sophisticated at reading information and using internet-based resources, the careers teacher has to do a huge job to work with those kids so that they can even put in a logical, coherent and compelling argument. I know term 3 is simply my busiest time of the year. The SEAS is not still a one-stop shop. There is still lots of other navigation to be done to look for scholarships as well. It is one step in the direction, but it is not all embracing. It is very easy for students to miss scholarship opportunities if they simply rely on the SEAS program.

We find that we have, like Bairnsdale, a lot of kids who are right in the middle. They do not meet the criteria for means-based scholarships and often there is a lack of sophistication — or principle in the case of a parent — where they are not able to structure their affairs to minimise their taxable income. If you minimise your taxable income in

the \$60 000-odd range, you can access Centrelink. Quite often there will be round robin payments done, I know, through family trust companies or whatever for students to be able to access that.

Economically we feel that the cost of living away from home to undertake tertiary study is without doubt the single greatest impediment to participation. That is basically it. For some students it is an overwhelming burden and it creates great financial hardships for people, as we have heard today. We find that students who can live on campus for at least one year are far more likely to continue their education and succeed. We find the best- friend syndrome arises every now and again — cannot afford to live on campus with all the advantages it has of involvement in university life so they take a flat with their best friend from school. In short, they become their worst enemy. There is a boy involved, there is a girl involved, the fridge is never stocked, the house is always dirty — it is just a disaster, and they come home again. We do everything we can to get the kids to at least spend a year on campus, meet new friends and then, if they want to go and share a house, move out with a bunch of their friends but with an established network.

Over the last few years we have seen a lots of kids decide they are going to go for independent status (for Youth Allowance). Some of them will do that by doing a gap year, earning money overseas. That money of course counts towards the earning 75 per cent of the national training wage. A lot of kids — and one of my kids in particular — take a year off, go to earn that wage out in the country. The further east you go, the harder it is. I have listed a few reasons as to why they cannot often achieve that independent status — lack of employment opportunities in any form, casual or part-time work being the norm, with insufficient hours available; difficulty in managing more than one casual job because of conflicting employer demands; low rates of pay — \$10 an hour, quite often cash in hand. How do you declare that when you are looking at earning independent payment? We have had personal experience of that as well as anecdotal experience talking to my students. Very few employers, as you move further east, pay award rates. If you look at hospitality award rates, national award rates, they are right up there. Look at what the kids actually get, they are often right down there.

Most students are only interested in taking 12 months off to qualify for independence, because we know that the independent rate does not kick in until after 18 months. But how many kids are going to take off two years to try and become independent? They want to defer for 12 months and they want to study and sometimes it is not possible with the income they get in that 12-month period.

As I said before, there is a limited local awareness or rejection on principle of creative and round-robin schemes as well. If you are mowing Uncle Joe's lawn and getting \$40 an hour — I know that happens in some situations (elsewhere). Unfortunately or fortunately it does not happen with us very much, but our kids miss out.

Once if one of our students deferred you knew they were not going to go, but now we have a lot of kids deferring, often for a gap year to travel overseas. They are often the sorts of kids who are going to go and nobody is going to stop them.

I have mentioned qualifying as a dependent student as well in our submission — factors involved with breaking down taxable income so families qualify for Youth Allowance.

Social factors up there in Orbost — we usually have homes with maybe one or both parents without tertiary qualifications. Often they have not even completed secondary education. It must be a contribution to students' aspiration and their ENTER. Sometimes education is just seen as a means to an end, not something to be valued.

As has been mentioned a couple of times we have a lack of diversity of professional role models, with only health, education and resource management. There may be one engineer in the shire. They just do not have the exposure and the stimulus.

Disadvantages of participating higher education — if we want to go to Melbourne from Orbost, we are looking at 380 kilometres, so a 760-kilometre round trip — 5 hours one-way and the cost of getting there. Last week we took some of the students to a Top Designs show at the museum. We left at 7 in the morning and were back at 10.30 at night. The school did not charge the kids for it, but we cannot do that every day.

A lot of parents would like to go to Melbourne while their kids study. Try selling a house in Orbost and buying a house in Melbourne — you cannot do it. So the kids simply have to find their own accommodation down there. The parents cannot move with them. We think that we are disadvantaged in this regard. You might have a student

who might live in a mid-to-outer suburb who decides to live on campus for the experience and all the benefits that brings. That is fine. Our kids cannot always do that.

Some of the advantages or disadvantages of participating are: a lot of our students aspire to trades and get them. We really work hard to get our kids into trades. We have had some reasonably good success there. But look at the wage for a qualified tradesperson, it may be award at best or sometimes below. I am generalising there, but if you can go away, get a teaching qualification and come back and pick up \$51 000 in your first year out, it is a far cry from having completed a trade in that case.

Where these kids can return to our communities as graduates, they often contribute. They assume positions of responsibility in the community. They are the president of the football club or running the netball or getting on the hospital board, getting involved in all sorts of things that they probably would not have been if they did not have a professional background. Their children also contribute to the academic tone of the school, so of course we would love them to come back.

One of the terms of reference was potential effects of geographical differences on the skill shortage. Amalgamation of the shires, privatisation of public utilities further diminished local diversity of professional role models in all those areas that were serviced in other years.

If I could just mention some strategies.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Please; quickly.

Mr BARTON — We would like to — I know these are federal issues — reassess taxable income scales to increase access to living-away allowance as a youth allowance, in particular for pay-as-you-earn wage earners. That would reduce the need for students to work full-time or their parents to get second and third jobs.

Greater recognition by tertiary institutions via their access and equity schemes of the effect of distance, cost and time to attend study lectures. Through VTAC, universities will not accept that difficulty in attending a study lecture is a valid problem. They will not accept that. We are specifically precluded from including that in VTAC special entry access schemes, even if it is a 750-kilometre, 10-hour round trip for us.

We would like to see increased use of access schemes such as the RMIT Schools Network Access Scheme. It has been an outstanding success. We have kids go there every year. That is where students are not chosen on ENTER but on their own application and on predictors by the school of their ability to succeed at university. We have had probably a couple of kids go in every year, and we have not had one come back yet. They have got into those courses completely without any requisite ENTER. The Monash University diploma of tertiary studies has been an outstanding success also.

As I mentioned, the RMIT bachelor of business localises some university training. We would love to see the expansion of that. We also acknowledge that commonwealth scholarship schemes have been terrific over the last couple of years. We would like to see them extended with more pre-course offered scholarships. Often the scholarship offer does not come until after offers have been announced. The students say, 'I cannot afford to go this year'. By the time the scholarship turns up, it is too late; they have missed the boat.

We would be looking at free public transport vouchers for country students who want to return. Loneliness is the greatest problem. Concession train and bus to Orbost is around \$50. Car trips are about \$80 of fuel, to say nothing of the dangers of young drivers and long trips. Maybe some vouchers home by rail so many times a year would be helpful. A pro rata system of applying postcodes to the 75 per cent of the national training wage requirement. Our kids just really struggle to get this independent rate for youth allowance. If there was a postcode application of that, the further away you work from the CBD could drop the amount of the national training wage that had to be earned and that would be a big assistance for some of our students as well.

More affordable, supported, supervised accommodation for rural students is also important. We believe that country students applying for on-campus accommodation, which was mentioned before, should have some level of priority over metropolitan students who have chosen it as a lifestyle option. Unsuited accommodation is a major cause for rural students dropping out. There is also a perception that full-fee-paying foreign students are advantaged over rural CSP students when applying for accommodation, and with skyrocketing city rents it is more and more important for proper accommodation to be found for students from our school.

Mr SUTHERLAND — As Andrew said, the situation for Lakes Entrance is slightly different, given that we do not have a tradition of students completing secondary education in our own town and then going on. There has always been a group of students who have been very successful at Bairnsdale, but making that transition at the beginning of year 11 is quite different to them making it at the end of year 12. The influence that that group of successful kids has on our whole community is diminished very much because those kids do not have those close links with all the kids that they would have once.

The challenges for us are about, firstly, increasing participation in completing years 11 and 12, but then there are aspirations for our students and the expectations of their parents — very few of our parents have tertiary qualifications. We get quite a vibrant community at Lakes Entrance, but when you look at the people and the skill set that is moving into the town, they are often older or professional people; they are not sending their children to Lakes Entrance Secondary College, and so that example is not built up there either.

They are the challenges that revolve around us. I think our experience with individual kids is probably too small to form any conclusions about how successful they are when they come to town.

Ms HEALEY — I think a lot of things have been covered very comprehensively. I would like to talk to you about my observations. I have been careers counsellor in East Gippsland for 20 years, and over the last seven years I have been the managed individual pathways coordinator at Maffra Secondary College. To give you a snapshot, in the seven years I have been there the role of my pathways coordination has changed somewhat.

Last year, 91 per cent of Maffra year 12 students received their first or second offer for a tertiary course. There is no problem with counselling the students on what is available for them; that is not an issue. But what has happened over the last seven years is that I have had to spend a lot more time in not only doing a plan for what courses they could do but now a plan for how they are going to get there, a deferral plan, a plan with mum and dad to educate them in the whys and wherefores of funding and processes.

I am just spending so much more time on the successful transition, if you like. The kids are more than willing to find out about courses, more than willing to be interested in them, but when it comes to the crunch our deferral rate has just skyrocketed; and anecdotally I know that those kids are not going back at the levels that they used to.

Last year I and my colleagues, other careers counsellors, spent hours sourcing, resourcing and equipping students with scholarship applications and information on the special entry schemes that Tony referred to. I would say on average we spent probably 3 to 4 hours with every student just on looking for opportunities that would enhance their ability to move and relocate. The school cannot really afford to resource me for that so it takes a lot of outside hours and a lot of goodwill with the students and their parents as well.

Scholarships have made a huge difference. One of our boys who received a very high score and went on to medicine also received some fantastic scholarships that made all the difference to his transition. Every year we apply for the rural nursing scholarship which is a \$30 000 bonus. Our recipient last year was a girl from Heyfield, who would not have even contemplated moving on unless we were able to do that. It took many hours of help and a lot of trust from the parents in my skills in allowing me to find out some quite personal details about their family situation to enable me to help their student.

Many of us have referred to the fact that if the students do defer, how are they going to find a local job? How are they going to find a job that will enable you them reach their independent allowance status? I am reluctant to advise the kids to take on traineeships, simply because with their low pay rate they might as well be working for Coles or Kmart and at least getting a reasonable amount for their time. Some of my kids who take on traineeships end up working two and three jobs just to sustain themselves.

Tony referred to a lot of our females taking on tertiary courses — more than the boys. A lot of our males in this area are able to pick up apprenticeships. There are not so many opportunities for our young female students. In particular, TAFE opportunities are limited. Any of my students who want to continue with a child-care career have to wait for every second year to enable them to do that at Sale-Fulham, otherwise there are transport issues in having them go down the line to Newborough to do a course. So there are limitations with our further study opportunities. I think that is pretty much a little snapshot.

Ms HODGE — I work with Leanne at Maffra Secondary College. I am the later years manager; I oversee what goes on at the later years end of the school. I am reasonably new to the role and reasonably new to the school.

I have only been at Maffra for a year but I was at Sale for five years prior to that. It is an ongoing thing with the demographic in our schools here as far as everyone at the table has discussed it.

Our school community and parental aspirations are the first hurdles that the kids have to overcome in order to move on to university. A lot of parents may not have even finished year 12 themselves. Especially in our school we are seeing parents who maybe finished in year 9 or year 10 and went on to farms or whatever. They do not even have traineeships or trades behind them, so for them a great outcome for their kids is to look at a trade, and that is what a lot of our boys are opting for.

When it comes to university and tertiary offers, last year we had wonderful ENTER scores achieved. It is one thing to achieve that, but then comes the hurdle; then comes the work for our kids. As I said before, a lot of our parents finished school early and went straight into full-time work. They do not have a lot of experience with what is down there in Melbourne, and for them it is an even more pronounced hurdle to try and think about how they are going to afford to get their kids to that next stage. Leanne and her colleague, Karen, at school tend to spend a lot of time trying to work through that issue with parents and with kids.

The biggest single thing that is stopping our kids is money. I agree with exactly what was said about the further you are away from town, the harder it gets. I am from further east so I know what we are talking about at Orbost and Mallacoota. I moved this way as the country kid; I went off to uni. I did those hard yards, did the many hours travelling, and I know personally that it is very hard for kids to afford it. Once they get down there they need to be able to maintain contact with their communities, which we know is so important for our country kids, to get a job and still go to uni, so there are a lot of things there for them to try and juggle.

There are a lot of suggestions there that are very important for country kids as far as establishing that connectedness to universities once they get there is concerned. That is really important for country kids. I write applications every year for country kids to get places in university accommodation, and they have to compete quite strongly to get into that. It is difficult, given the nature of where the kids are coming from, and I think there should be some form of scheme to assist kids coming from a rural location. They should have some sort of preference in getting into those halls of residence because we know that it is a really big boundary for our kids when they go down there.

I think Leanne has covered most of the other stuff.

Ms TAYLOR — Everyone has covered pretty much all of the issues that I would raise. My story is a little bit different. I have worked in Melbourne for most of my teaching and career-counselling life. I only moved out here in the last few years. Taking on the job of careers counsellor in a rural school was totally different. All of the assumptions I had about going to university and counselling students with regards to that were just blown away because the kids, for all of those reasons, just did not see that pathway as an option.

On the comments that Tony made about partnerships with universities: if we could extend that, it would be fantastic, because those programs work. And of course all the financial ideas that people expressed are fantastic. The one thing, I guess, that stands out for me and the noticeable difference between the students I work with in Melbourne and the students here, and the upshot of all the financial issues, is their lack of confidence and that they adjust their expectations based on that lack of confidence to perhaps go to Melbourne, or whatever.

I will leave you with an example. A student came to see me last week who had completed year 12 at the end of last year, so he is six months down the track from his exams. He just wanted to go into a trade; that is all he wanted to do — six months later he has come back to see me to say, ‘No, I want to be a primary school teacher. How do I get into university?’. How many other kids are like him who are not coming back to see me to find out what they can do? I think the confidence thing is a real consequence of all those financial burdens.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Thanks, Judy. Robert, do you want to add anything, or have you said your piece?

Mr BOUCHER — No, I have had my go.

Mr ELASMAR — Tony, I know the deferral issue is important, but you mentioned the scholarship and that if someone wants to defer they lose their scholarship. It could be for any reason; it could be for a health reason or because of pressure or something, and they want to come back but financially they cannot get it. What happens?

Mr BARTON — If they have got a scholarship or if they want to come back to uni?

Mr ELASMAR — If they have got a scholarship — if they deferred and came back and they wanted that scholarship?

Mr BARTON — I am sorry; my hearing is not very good.

Mr ELASMAR — They lose the scholarship, you said?

Mr BARTON — They would lose it, yes.

Mr ELASMAR — What happens if a student decides to come back?

Mr BARTON — If they have been awarded the scholarship and they have already deferred, can they — I do not think they can?

Ms HEALEY — Often not, no. They have just lost their money.

Mr BARTON — It is not written in here, but they have lost it, I think that is right.

Ms TAYLOR — And that is particularly with accommodation.

Mr BOUCHER — One of the other challenges, too, is the range of scholarships that are out there and the rules around access and the use of those scholarships. We had a kid who ended up doing nursing. She got that ‘you beaut’ 30 000 — terrific. She also had another scholarship. That made a significant difference for her. She deferred for a year and she was really concerned. When she looked into it she actually lost one of those scholarships. But with that significant amount of money, the \$30 000, she went, ‘Yes, I’m going to follow through with this’. She is now doing the course. When I get old and grey she will be there to look after me.

Mr HALL — Throughout this inquiry we have heard of significant issues around why there is a difference in participation rates between areas in which people live — economic and a range of social issues as well. Social issues are access, family support as well as aspirational issues. Do any of you have a gut feeling, if you weighted those two issues — economic and social — about why country students have a lesser participation rate in higher education? What would the weighting be for those? Would it be 70-30 or 80-20 or 50-50? What do you reckon?

Ms HALDANE — Economic would come in at least at 70 per cent to 80 per cent.

Mr HALL — So 70-30 and 80-20?

Ms HALDANE — Yes.

Mr HALL — Are there any different views on that?

Mr BOUCHER — I reckon the further out you go that would probably change. In our setting for some of our kids who are probably questioning themselves more about how they would cope with the adjustment, the social issues would perhaps rank a little higher than finances, because they would be questioning themselves more and more.

Ms HEALEY — I just think that by the time we have got them to year 12 some of those social issues and lack of achievement have been addressed in a little way, and then I think for Maffra students the economics take over.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — If I was the Minister for Education and I was sitting in front of you — I am referring this to the career teachers — what more would you ask from me to assist students in your schools to equip them to decide what course, what pathway, they should be taking?

Mr BARTON — I speak with a vested interest here because careers counselling and managing individual pathways are given different emphasis at different schools. You need to put people in front of students. You can pay somebody a higher allowance, but if they are not given the time within their allotment to work face to face with students, the system does not work. In other years there was an agreement which specified the amount that careers

teachers spent in that job and spent teaching, and there was not very much teaching. That disappeared back in the 1990s, and now it is very much an individual school decision.

Ms HODGE — I would like to second exactly what Tony said. In our school setting we are finding that we have to fight every year to maintain our careers time. We know that it is a pivotal part of what we do in our later years of school and it relates directly to how successful our kids are. Our careers program is probably one of the best I have seen. I have done a bit of professional travelling last year, looking at schools and what they are doing all around Australia, and I think we are doing a wonderful job with our kids. We start very early and we do a lot of preparation with them.

Pip, one of our ex-students, will talk about that later when she comes up. We are fighting to keep our time. That resourcing is a real issue in our school. I think addressing how much time should be spent with kids — especially in country schools, because it is not just about finding them a pathway and finding them their career; it is also about educating their parents and themselves about how to get there.

Ms HEALEY — No matter how many quirky products or websites or whatever is made available to the kids, it is the one-on-one time and the reassurance and the building of that self-confidence. That is the crucial part of any program for a school. It cannot be replaced by websites or DVDs.

Ms MONAHU — There are a couple of things that I have made a few notes of. There are some simplifications to the processes that we have to take the students through that could be made. They are minor things like, as Tony alluded, when using the SEAS. We have to put in 1500 character statements as to why students are disadvantaged. You cannot use the fact that they cannot get to Melbourne for open days et cetera. Small things like that would simplify the process to make it less complex for the students to even consider applying under.

The mentors have been mentioned several times this morning. That is probably a big thing as well — getting successful students back into the schools. We do a lot of work with that. But that is not always possible because the students who have been successful at university are out there working and they do not have the time to come back to the town. That is another thing.

One of the striking things that we have found in recent years is access to the open days. Many students from our school have work commitments and sporting commitments, and for many of them the costs of getting to open days is prohibitive. In the past we have run buses; that is no longer financially viable for us and we rely on the students and their parents to get down to Melbourne themselves, which again is limiting their access to what is possible. Those few small things, along with Tony's very detailed submission, I think are enough.

Ms HEALEY — Can I just add to Sue's comment about that? We have a service, the Tertiary Information Service, that comes down to East Gippsland every year. I think I could be fair in saying that perhaps it has been watered down in the last few years. The impact it has had on students has been less and less. The commitment that perhaps the universities have shown to that program, where they have had to come out rurally, has perhaps been less than before. Anything that could be done to boost or support that service would be fantastic, because it is often the only port of call that our year 12 students will have with a tertiary institution.

Ms MONAHU — If I can just add to what Leanne was saying: in fact this year the TIS, which was scheduled for this region for last week, has actually been postponed until August. So our year 12s across the region are severely disadvantaged. It is way too late.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — I encourage you to ask students or parents who wish to make a submission to the committee to please do so. There is still plenty of time for them to do so. I appreciate you all coming down; I know how busy you are. Thank you very much for your submissions.

Mr SUTHERLAND — May I just add one thing?

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Sure.

Mr SUTHERLAND — From the perspective of the Lakes Entrance Secondary College, and I would imagine of Bairnsdale as well. I mean, 15 per cent to 17 per cent of our students are Koori. Those issues that were raised around our non-indigenous students are just multiplying many times over for those students, and I think we

need to think about how we can put some fast-tracking in place to get some of the role models and mentors and have some successes for those students, but, of course, we know that it is that much more difficult.

Ms HALDANE — I would just add to what Craig has said. I would imagine the weighting for Koori students and the community and social connections would be 80–90 per cent because the financial support is there if we get the kids through year 12. There is certainly lots of financial support available but leaving home is very, very difficult.

Witnesses withdrew.

CORRECTED VERSION

EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

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

Bairnsdale — 20 May 2008

Members

Mr M. Dixon	Mr S. Herbert
Mr N. Elasmarr	Mr G. Howard
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Witnesses

Ms H. Barry,
Mr H. Barton,
Ms E. McKenzie,
Ms S. Grixti, and
Mr P. Haylock, Bairnsdale Secondary College; and
Ms P. Ericson, Maffra Secondary College.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Before I welcome you I advise you that any evidence taken by the committee is subject to parliamentary privilege. In other words, you can say what you wish and you will not get into trouble with your school or school principal or anyone. They cannot sue you; they cannot tell you off. Welcome. Now what I would like is if we go around and you tell me a little bit about yourself and your plans for the future and any problems you have had in the past.

Ms ERICSON — My name is Pip Ericson. I am actually a deferred student as well. I attended Maffra Secondary College last year. I got into outdoor education teaching at Victoria University at Melton. My original plans were to defer and perhaps go to Europe for a couple of months or something. That plan changed because I just could not afford it and I would rather save money for university because I could not afford it. I used to work at a supermarket in Maffra but I was not getting enough hours and I just did not enjoy work.

I recently got a job at a surf shop in Maffra. It is full-time work, I love it and it pays enough money to earn that \$18 000. So hopefully I will earn enough money to get my independence and go off to uni next year.

Mr HAYLOCK — My name is Patrick Haylock and last year I was at Bairnsdale Secondary College. I decided to defer for a year. I got into a course at ANU, a Bachelor of Science with Honours, and I originally decided to defer because I thought I wanted to do a lot this year and broaden my experiences before I got stuck into university.

However, that has again slightly changed because of the independence allowance especially. I want to be as independent as possible from my parents. They have already put two students through university so I would rather remain as separate as possible especially since I am going to be in Canberra and it is going to be difficult to rely on somebody back here. As I mentioned, my brother and my sister have gone through university; one has deferred and one has gone straight through. I have seen the problems that have been associated with both of these strategies. My circumstances seem to say that perhaps I should defer and that is why I have chosen to do it.

Ms McKENZIE — Hello. My name is Emma McKenzie and I am currently in year 12 at Bairnsdale Secondary College, and next year I am hoping to go to university to study primary school teaching.

Ms GRIXTI — My name is Sarah Gixti. I attended Bairnsdale Secondary College for my VCE. I decided to defer for the year after. I did a traineeship and worked part-time as well because to get my independence I had to. I am currently a second-year student doing a Bachelor of Commerce at RMIT at the Bairnsdale campus. They do it through the TAFE. I am just waiting to finish my course and then I will look for a job.

Mr BARTON — I am Harry Barton from Bairnsdale Secondary College and I am doing year 12. I am looking to do a uni course in environmental science or something like that, if not next year then the year after. The main reasons I would defer is for financial reasons and also just for the personal choice of doing things other than school and because I need the money.

Ms BARRY — I go to Bairnsdale Secondary College where I am one of the school captains. I was the highest achieving student in year 11 last year, and I want to get into a course like medicine or something like that. So really the only options for what I want to do are Monash in Melbourne or Melbourne University. My grandma and great-grandma both studied medicine at Melbourne, so I would love to do something like that. I have always wanted to take a year off. I want to travel but I am really not sure if I will be able to make the money that I need to go overseas, and that is a big concern for me because living in Melbourne is really expensive and doing a science degree, you do not get much time to work outside of course time. Balancing that with trying to maintain a social network while you are studying is going to be a big problem, I think.

My parents are supporting my older brother who goes to university in Tassie. This is his first year. He is living on-campus and it has been really expensive just getting set up over there. He earned the \$18 000 required to qualify for youth allowance by the start of the year but could not get it until six months in so that has been really hard especially with all those starting set-up costs. Even now that he has got it, it is not really enough for him to live on so they are having to keep supporting him so I am not sure how easy it is going to be for them to be helping me when I finally get to uni. So I would say that the biggest concern I face is financial.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Thanks, Hannah. Can I start by asking how valuable was the advice that you received from your careers teacher?

Ms ERICSON — Extremely.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — For all of you?

Ms BARRY — I was always pretty decided about what I wanted to do.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Those of you who have deferred as a result of financial reasons, were you aware of the scholarships that were available for various universities?

Ms GRIXTI — I was not really aware of the scholarships. I took my own time in the year when I deferred to look them up and I applied for them at the end. If I had not deferred at the end of year 12, I would have missed all the applications for scholarships, because that was at the time of my exams and I just did not have time to look at that sort of thing.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Anyone else?

Ms ERICSON — Our career advisers were extremely helpful. Probably about midway through the year we became aware of the SEAS applications and each student put one of them in. Even if they were not going to university, they just did one to make sure. So that was helpful. Every morning we would have a briefing, and they would let us know about new scholarships that were available or new positions, even if the newspaper just said job or something, like an apprenticeship for those who were not planning on going to uni. So they were very helpful when it came to things like that.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Finally, can I ask: once you go to university or TAFE or get a job, do you hope to come back to this region to work and live or do you hope to be involved in some other regional city?

Mr HAYLOCK — I want to do something in research science and it is probably going to be biology at a molecular level, and the facilities around here will not be able to provide what I need to conduct research properly. So although I would like to come back to the country region I will probably find myself migrating to a capital city somewhere.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Anyone else?

Mr BARTON — I think this is a beautiful area to live so I would like to come back here one day, if not soon then maybe when I am older and have a job that could be incorporated into the surrounding areas of wilderness and stuff we have got here.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Hannah, with your medical degree?

Ms BARRY — For the moment I am just waiting to get out of Bairnsdale. I am really excited about going to the city and do not plan to come back for quite a while. I want to travel and maybe work overseas, but I can imagine maybe that as I get to 35 or 40 I might have a family and come back here and do GP things or just work in a country area. But for the moment I really do not have any inclination to stay around.

Mr DIXON — Emma, I used to be a primary school teacher and principal, where do you hope to do your course, and do you hope to go straight into it?

Ms McKENZIE — Yes, I do. I hope to go to Melbourne next year and start there.

Mr DIXON — Whereabouts are you applying to?

Ms McKENZIE — Deakin in Burwood.

Mr DIXON — Okay. That is good. And just a general question to the group, those who have to defer and work, are jobs available for young people to save that sort of money that you need to save up in the area?

Mr HAYLOCK — I found a job quite easy to get, but that was circumstantial. I was lucky to get that so early on in the year. It just turned out that they had a gap year student last year and so therefore they had a vacancy. But I have other friends who were looking for two, three, four months and some are still looking. One was dropped from the army gap year and he only found out two months ago, so he is still looking as well. It really depends on who you know almost, and if you are lucky enough to know the people who are looking for workers.

Ms ERICSON — I was lucky enough that I already had a casual job at the supermarket, which is one of the main jobs for kids in Maffra. I was looking around everywhere, but the problem is because you are only going to be around until say January or February, they are not interested. They are looking for someone over a longer period of time. Like Leanne said, traineeships just are not giving you enough. You have to get another job. It is too hard sometimes; especially in small communities too.

Mr DIXON — Is it seasonal here in Bairnsdale? Are there more jobs available around the summer?

Ms BARRY — I do not think as much as some other places. As an example, my boyfriend last year was in Lakes Entrance and that is really seasonal. He worked at a fish and chip shop the whole year. He hated it but he just did not really have a choice. He is at a private university now and he got a scholarship there, but he still had to work that whole year because his family literally could not pay the money. I have been up to visit him, and he and his sister are living in a house and when their parents were looking they would go to open days and 50 people would turn up looking for a house. It is just so hard to get them. The place they are in now, he travels over an hour to get to uni and sometimes he will go without food to buy his Metcard because he just has no money.

Mr ELASMAR — Just a quick one to Sarah. Sarah, have you been aware of the scholarships, and would that have changed your position?

Ms GRIXTI — Probably not really. Working for a year gives you an indication of what you want to do and makes sure your ideas and your ambitions are concrete, to make sure you are going into the right course or whether or not you want to continue working. I just found that working for longer, or the year in between, had given me an opportunity to see what I really wanted to do, so I think even if I was aware of them, it still would not have made a lot of difference.

Mr HALL — First of all, thank you all for coming in and meeting with us. I have a couple of questions. For you first of all, Hannah, why isn't medicine at Monash Gippsland an option for you?

Ms BARRY — I just like the thing about getting out of the country. I am really attracted to living in the city and that diversity that is there and something that is a bit different. The chance to live by myself.

Mr HALL — And Emma, you could do education at Monash Gippsland as well. But you have chosen Deakin.

Ms McKENZIE — Yes. I have accommodation in Melbourne, so that is a big thing that I would not have to worry about. And also just the opportunities in Melbourne — the lifestyle and all that kind of thing I think I would prefer.

Mr HALL — I can understand that, but a lot of people, parents and teachers, are telling us that we should be trying to do more to get university campuses out in the country areas so that people do not have to go through the economic cost of living in Melbourne et cetera. How do you respond to that, if your mum and dad are saying, 'We want you closer to home' and you are saying, 'We want the bright lights of the city'?

Ms BARRY — I think it might be a fair bit to do with the sort of people Emma and I are. Some kids would have a lot more trouble moving away from their families to begin with, and might just not want to take that step straight out of year 12, so a university where they can commute from home would be a really good option. But then other kids are just really ready to leave their home town.

Mr HAYLOCK — Part of university from a country perspective is to get a whole wide range of experiences that you have not had before. Bringing the university to the country would make the transition more easy, but it would take away a bit of the university glamour that actually gets students to go there in the first place, and I think you would still find that a lot of students would go to the cities and have a lot of trouble getting the universities to be attractive here in the first place. For some courses especially.

Mr HALL — My other question is to you Pip, and also Patrick. You both deferred this year for reasons other than what it turned out to be. Originally you both wanted to travel, I think. Economically you could not do that so you had to defer for another reason. Do you regret deferring?

Ms ERICSON — No, I do not.

Mr HALL — And you would have deferred any way, even if you had not planned to travel?

Ms ERICSON — Most likely, yes.

Mr HALL — For the economic reasons?

Ms ERICSON — Most likely, yes. I wanted a year where I could just have a break, take time off, work, become a little more independent than I was. You do school for 13 years and that is your routine every day for that long. I just wanted to take a break. I know moving to Melbourne is a completely different thing but you are still going to school every day so I wanted to get out there, get more independent and work but stay in the community as well. I just was not ready to go; I wanted to grow up a little bit before I left.

Mr HALL — And you are enjoying it?

Ms ERICSON — Yes. I am having the best time. Cannot wait to go to uni though. I hope that by the end of this year I will be so hungry to go that I will love it when I go.

Mr HAYLOCK — Now that I have realised that I will not be going overseas, it is almost fifty-fifty whether I would have gone to uni or not. Looking back, if I was aware of what position I would be in now, I would have been more ready to go to university than I was before; aware that I would just be doing a job basically that is a little bit irrelevant to what I want to do but which is still a good experience. I would have a lot more trouble tossing up the decision if I went back now.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — And can I finally ask: did any of the universities visit your schools, and if they did, was the program that they undertook at your school worthwhile?

Ms ERICSON — There was only one that I remember, where representatives of the universities came. It was held at Sale Catholic College and I think all four secondary schools from Sale and Maffra came, so Gippsland Grammar, Sale College, the Catholic College Sale, and Maffra Secondary College, and that represented pretty much most of the universities from Melbourne and Monash Gippsland. You got brochures and things but you did not really get an understanding of what goes on at a university. It was just a case of grab a brochure. It was not as if you were going to look at it. It was just a case of walk around, grab it, put it in your bag, get your freebies.

Mr HALL — Did you go down to the orientation days?

Ms ERICSON — One of the teachers mentioned it before. I actually struggled to get down there because I was playing netball on Saturdays and that was a commitment, and also I was working on weekends, so I could not make it to any of them.

Ms BARRY — I do not think we have had unis at our school, but last year Harry and I applied for the Kwong Lee Dow young scholars thing at Melbourne uni, which is for high-achieving kids and we both got accepted into that; which tends to be like an advertising program for Melbourne. If you choose to go there they do give you one-off payments or they do programs once you're doing the course there, but it is not really ongoing support. That has been interesting, but for the first one they did they had overnight accommodation for regional students at one of the colleges, which was really good. They have not offered that since, and I could not get up to one because it is a 7-hour round trip on the train and it costs like \$40 for the ticket, and I contacted them and explained that, and they could not help with travel costs. It was difficult to get there.

Ms GRIXTI — I had the course coordinator for RMIT, for the TAFE, come to our school and that was actually the course I went into so she was very helpful. I think that if there were a variety of courses other than just business, that there would be more students who would attend in regional areas: I know a lot of people in my year who did go to Melbourne. They wanted the uni life to begin with, but after the first year they just wanted to come home. They are living on campus, not many of them stay longer than the first year, and they would like to come back. If they had the opportunity to do their course here, that would definitely with be an option for them.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — I thank you all. I wish you all the best with your studies and good luck for the future. I also thank all of the witnesses; and Craig Ingram, the member for Gippsland East, thank you for staying for all of the inquiry. I declare the hearing closed.

Committee adjourned.