

CORRECTED VERSION

EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE (SUB-COMMITTEE)

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

Melbourne — 23 July 2008

Members of the Sub-Committee

Mr M. Dixon	Mr G. Howard
Mr N. Elasmarr	Mr N. Kotsiras
Mr P. Hall	

Chair: Mr G. Howard

Deputy Chair: Mr N. Kotsiras

Staff

Executive Officer: Ms K. Ellingford

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

Committee Administrative Officer: Ms N. Tyler

Witnesses

Mr G. McLean, general manager, youth transitions division, and

Dr S. Glover, manager, data and evaluation, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.

The CHAIR — I am happy to declare this hearing of the Subcommittee of the Parliament open, and welcome our guests from the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. In declaring the meeting open, you would be aware that in the inquiry in regard to geographical differences in the rate in which Victorian students participate in higher education the issues that you share with us are covered by parliamentary privilege. I do not know that that is going to be relevant to you, but it is something you perhaps ought to be aware of. We are very pleased to have you with us today. I do not know whether George or Sara is opening up first, but if you make a presentation to us initially, we will have some questions to follow up with.

Dr GLOVER — We do have a presentation for you, and I am happy to hand this out. What we are proposing to do in this presentation is to overview briefly the policy environment of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development in this area. We then want to go into, in particular, some of the data that we have on transitions. We will be drawing your attention particularly to some of the data from our 2008 On Track survey, which is our latest survey of transitions to further education, training or employment. Finally, we want to look at what that On Track data says about the barriers that young people are experiencing in going into higher education in particular. That is really what we want to do. I will hand over to George to begin with the policy, and then I will cover the data areas.

Mr McLEAN — Perhaps to explain the split presentation, Sara is general manager of data and evaluation, so she knows much more about her data and its meaning than I do, and I am general manager of the youth transitions division, which has policy responsibility for the covering of school education and what happens between schools, TAFE and university, although of course policy responsibility for university rests with the Department of Innovation, Industry and Regional Development.

The government's policy in the area of youth transitions is that an increasing proportion of young people will make a smooth transition from compulsory school education to further education, training and employment — this being seen as part of the human capital agenda, as a critical stage of development. The government's goal in this area is to increase the proportion of young people who complete year 12 or its vocational equivalent, but the government does not have explicit policy in relation to changed access of students to university education. It is implied in the increasing proportions of year 12 or equivalent completions that an increasing proportion of young people would have the opportunity to apply for higher education places, but given that higher education places are largely determined by the commonwealth government, increased access is limited by commonwealth government decisions. In relation to specific policy, the state government does not have specific policy to increase university access by students, although its current submission to the higher education review might put forward such aspirations, just as the state has in the past.

In relation to disaggregation of that overall policy goal of increasing year 12 or equivalent completions, the goal is not disaggregated by geography — that is, we do not have specific geographic targets for increases in year 12 or equivalent completion. Our performance in this area, however, is strong. It is at this point that I would refer you to the presentation. If you look at page 2 of that presentation where the data presentation starts, you can see that since the election of this current government there has been a reasonably steady upward trend in year 12 or equivalent completions. In 2007 we stand at 86.1 per cent of 20 to 24-year-olds completing year 12 or equivalent in Victoria, as compared to 83.5 per cent nationally; the dark line of Victoria is above the light blue line of Australia. That trend is mirrored both at the national level and at the state level — an upward trend with the gap opening and closing a little bit year by year. We suspect that is largely a manifestation of the survey basis on which this data is gathered. There is a little bit of error each year, so there is a bit of bouncing around but a generally steady upward trend in year 12 or equivalent completion, meaning that the proportion of young Victorians who potentially could go to university is steadily increasing to what I have already mentioned as pretty much a fixed pool of places.

The second chart that you have in front of you, on page 3, perhaps shows a greater level of detail. This is, in Victoria, the proportion of 19-year-olds who complete year 12 or equivalent. We have chosen 19 for this performance measure as the modal age at which young people complete their VCE is 18, so this measures completion at the very next year and gives a few more people the chance to complete. You can see that again there is a reasonably steady upward trend of those who at 19 in Victoria complete year 12 or equivalent. It is a stacked bar, so the darker blue part is those who are completing year 12 VCE or VCAL and the lighter stack on top of it is those who are completing a vocational equivalent. In relation to year 12 completion but also year 12 or equivalent there is growth. It is the completion of year 12 that opens up the option of university entry. Again, the same pattern as is in the national figures is reflected in the state figures at age 19. It is at that point that I pass over to Sara to talk in more detail.

Dr GLOVER — Taking on then the previous slide in terms of the completion at age 19, when we look at the comparison of metropolitan and non-metropolitan in that same data we do start to see some differences in the patterns of participation or completion at the age of 19. It should be noted that what we see is that at age 19 we are seeing a bigger take-up of that in the non-metropolitan area. What we are seeing is that students will be completing later in the non-metropolitan areas.

Taking up the idea in the next slide of looking at disadvantage, we did some analysis looking at the strong growth in completion in some geographical areas of the state. We picked up this particular issue of lower socioeconomic regions, and we looked at the northern metropolitan region in particular. We can see there where we are seeing the rates of completion in many respects growing strongly in comparison to other areas of Victoria, showing that completion of students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

We have also looked at drilling down into the On Track data. The picture is really very positive here, in that from the On Track data in 2008 only 2.9 per cent of young people at that point were looking for work. The rest have successfully transitioned. They are either deferring their place, they are employed, they are in apprenticeships and traineeships — and what you can see there is an increase in trend in young people taking up apprenticeships and traineeships. You have got the TAFE enrolled and also university enrolled. We are seeing, into 2008, a slight decline in the university enrolments based on the On Track data. Nevertheless the overall picture of successful transitions is a strong one.

When we look at, say, the western region, so looking at a lower socioeconomic region, what is the pattern there? We are actually seeing, again, a very strong pattern. What you notice in the western region is a strong growth in young people actually going into university over time. In fact the rate of decline from 2007 to 2008 in western metropolitan region is less than any other part of the state. This is really quite a positive story in terms of young people from the western metropolitan region actually accessing higher education. Again, what we can say in 2008 is that we have got 97.2 per cent of young people engaged in either education, training or employment. The pattern is that university enrolment rates have not improved significantly in non-metropolitan areas. You can see that trend of providers in both metropolitan and non-metropolitan in university enrolments.

The big issue for the committee I think is the rates of deferral of tertiary offers. Going into 2007 we continue to see that data increasing. We are getting a widening gap of deferrals between metropolitan and non-metropolitan. When we look at the reasons for that, we have highlighted some in the submission but we draw your attention to page 11, which gives you a much more detailed set of issues about why young people are facing special barriers in non-metropolitan areas, and you can see that chart there. Essentially travel and distance and finance are the big issues that are encouraging young people to defer their education. This is particularly the case for the Loddon, Goulburn and Gippsland regions, where we are seeing quite large numbers of people saying it is hard to support themselves through study and it is the costs of study that are creating an issue for them. That is the end of our formal presentation, and we are opening up for questions.

The CHAIR — Thank you for that; we are just having a look over those statistics, which are very interesting.

Mr KOTSIRAS — In the graphs on pages 6, 7 and 8 you start off with the year 2003. Have you got data from 1999?

Mr McLEAN — The On Track survey was introduced in 2003. Victoria was the first state to introduce this form of tracking so that we could understand what was happening for students. It is now copied in several other states, including Queensland and Tasmania, but 2003 is the first year that this survey data is available, so no, we cannot go back before then.

Mr KOTSIRAS — The other question concerns the barriers which you have outlined as to why kids are deferring. Is there any policy? What is the government doing about alleviating those problems or barriers?

Mr McLEAN — On the issue of deferral, particularly in non-metropolitan areas, income support for students engaged in tertiary study is something that the commonwealth government provides for. Its levels of support and its eligibility criteria have been the subject of some commentary as it has been noted that the capacity of students, particularly in non-metro areas, to undertake higher education is diminishing. It is partly associated with the ongoing economic circumstances in non-metropolitan areas — that is, the drought. We notice in relation to school education that the proportion of school-age students who require support is increasing — those who become

eligible for support is increasing. But, equally, it is true of those who would wish to undertake tertiary study. I suppose what I am saying is that income support for tertiary students is a policy setting of the commonwealth government.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Are there any scholarships which are offered by the state government?

Mr McLEAN — The state government I do not believe offers scholarships in this area, but a range of philanthropic entities does. The one that I am aware of is the Dafydd Lewis Trust, which since the time of the gold rush has offered scholarships to needy students in this area. That question should probably be asked of my DIIRD colleagues. They would know if any state government scholarships operate, but I do not think they do.

Mr DIXON — The mix of students going on to university, TAFE, deferrals, employment, how does the Victorian mix compare with other states? Are you aware? Is it a fairly uniform thing across all the states and territories?

Dr GLOVER — I understand that Victoria has a higher level of transition into university than other states. Queensland, for example, which also conducts this methodology, or this survey, has much higher rates of transition into apprenticeships and traineeships, I think perhaps reflecting the labour market in Queensland. They are the only differences that I am aware of. In comparison, Queensland is the only state that has been running this over a couple of years.

Mr McLEAN — I think Victoria's submissions over many years to the commonwealth regarding higher education places overall has argued that our occupational profile has meant that we have always had more university places in Victoria, and we need them to provide for our economy.

If your question though was also about the pattern inside macro places, then it is true in Victoria and it is true in every other jurisdiction that school achievement has a socioeconomic component, and the method whereby you establish your right to go to university is through competitive score. Therefore it is reflected in university access and we have a social geography. So that *SES profile of university access translates into a geographic profile, which your committee would be well aware of and I am sure that is why you are looking into this issue.

Dr GLOVER — I think the successful transitions that we are seeing in places like western metropolitan region comes off the back of very strong retention in school leavings. I think we are seeing that flow-on effect.

Mr McLEAN — There is a good story is well.

The CHAIR — I was going to ask in regard to that whether you have explanations in regard to the increases in retention rate in western metropolitan and northern metropolitan regions? Yes, we have better retention rates. Is there any explanation that we can purport for that?

Dr GLOVER — A range of curriculum offerings in schools, so it is broadening the options and pathways for student learning. George can talk about the policy area with regard to that.

Mr McLEAN — So with the goal of increasing year 12 or equivalent completion, the curriculum offerings in senior secondary education have expanded significantly since the time of the *Blackburn report and the creation of the VCE. The VCE was a policy response to the reality that increasing proportions of young people wished to stay on in school, and that the curriculum offerings needed to reflect not the narrow pathway of those being retained to year 12 primarily going to university but the broader pathways that we see now reflected in this data of proportions going to university, going to TAFE, going to apprenticeship and going to employment. So the senior secondary curriculum has to accommodate all those destinations.

Perhaps the most fundamental steps have been the introduction of vocational education and training subjects — fully accredited vocational subjects since I think 1995 or 1996 — and the expansion of those offerings both through restructure of the VCE and funding support in both the government and non-government schools system to undertake those subjects; and then in 2003 the creation of VCAL as another vehicle for students wishing to complete a senior secondary certificate but not necessarily looking at a university destination.

The CHAIR — One of the other things we have picked up in our hearings to date is that some of the universities are attempting to link more directly in with what is happening in secondary education to raise

aspiration to help to make that transitional link appear easier, and I am wondering whether the department has a view of directly supporting those links?

Mr McLEAN — Yes, we do. If you look at specific initiatives you can see this playing out. One example would be the regeneration project in the northern metro area, around Broadmeadows. We are one of the parties to that regeneration where there is an amalgamation of schools to create fewer and larger secondary schools. There is a strategic alliance between the schools that have been created and TAFE and university, with university being involved in the structuring of the offerings in the Broadmeadows precinct.

The CHAIR — So a particular university in that case?

Mr McLEAN — Melbourne University. The strongest example is provided by Victoria University, perhaps not surprisingly given its location and its mission. Again, our DIIRD colleagues would probably be able to speak about this more eloquently, but there are strategic partnerships between VU and local schools, both in relation to university access and in relation to TAFE access with articulation arrangements. More generally there is an emerging pattern of tertiary providers, both university and TAFE, understanding that by creating a partnership you create better pathways which serve the purposes of students but also the institutions.

Mr DIXON — What is the status of careers education within our schools? Are there any trends or changes in it at all?

Mr McLEAN — For the last two years the government has offered both career education scholarships and industry placement to support further development of career advice in Victorian government secondary schools. These scholarships and the placement activity are designed to both enhance career education overall but to have a particular focus on increasing career teachers' awareness of vocational pathways in addition to university pathways. It is generally felt that career education specialists inside the government school system at least are reasonably well aware of university pathways but less well aware of the broader range of pathways.

The CHAIR — We understand a lot of these areas are really federally directed in terms of tertiary education as such, but can I ask if the Victorian government will be making or has made a submission to the federal inquiry on tertiary education?

Mr McLEAN — The departments are engaged in the activity of preparing a submission. The fate of that submission would be with the relevant minister, Minister Allan. We understand that it is likely that Victoria will make such a submission.

The CHAIR — Do we know whether it would be likely to include comments about participation from regional Victoria? When we look at the statistics that you present there is still a low representation from regional Victoria. Perhaps there is a need to ensure that universities have a greater sense of activity in the regions that help with that transition. I do not know whether you can suggest that that is an area that is certainly under consideration for such a submission.

Mr McLEAN — Without straying into the territory of what a minister may decide should be in a Victorian submission, or indeed what a department has provided to a minister as the basis for her decision, the education department has had a long commentary on the fact that deferrals in non-metro areas are an issue and student support in non-metro areas through government schemes are an issue and that access to higher education through what is available without relocating to Melbourne is a longstanding issue. Does that answer the question?

The CHAIR — Yes, I understand the constraints you have.

Mr KOTSIRAS — You have just said it is a big issue and yes, you are preparing a submission; I understand that. Is the state government putting up any ideas to assist with those problems?

Mr McLEAN — I cannot predict what a minister might put into — —

Mr KOTSIRAS — No, I am not talking about what the minister will decide. I am talking about the department. You are saying it is an issue. I assume you are not sitting on your hands and allowing the thing to go away because the feds are to blame. If it is a problem, is the department working on some scenarios or ways to alleviate some of those problems?

Mr McLEAN — The department is supporting DIIRD in this matter. So the department with primary responsibility is DIIRD. We are providing DIIRD with our background data and our understanding of what is happening to secondary students, but the issue of the delivery system and student support to access the delivery system of higher education is for DIIRD rather than the education department.

Mr KOTSIRAS — How about either year 10s or year 11s, lifting the aspiration of the students; is that an issue?

Mr McLEAN — Yes, it is.

Mr KOTSIRAS — What have you put in place to assist or lift the aspiration of students and parents?

Mr McLEAN — If we are talking about making the student population and their parents aware of the benefits of completing year 12 or its equivalent, then most definitely we do that. On Track is one of our vehicles for doing it. Through the information releases around On Track it becomes quite apparent that those who complete year 12 or its equivalent are better placed in terms of subsequent economic life and their capacity to participate fully in social and political life. We make that point through the On Track survey. Government policy certainly makes that point and re-emphasises it all the time. It is why the goal has been set for year 12 or equivalent completions.

Yes, there is a nexus between that and going to university. If anything, we downplay that, because we say that the aspiration to complete year 12 or equivalent is not just about going to university. There are many valuable and useful pathways. In its work the department is always careful to say it is not just about university access. It is about TAFE access, it is about apprenticeships, it is about employment. It is about the full range of things that completing schooling or the equivalent of schooling equips young people to do. Higher education, university education, is one element of that. There is no doubt that there is a pull-through effect. So if the pattern of delivery, if the delivery network for higher education, were improved in some areas, there would be some pull-through effect for year 12 completion. Equally, if there were better student support in students' capacity to take up those access opportunities, then yes, there would be some pull-through effect. We make this point to our colleagues in DIIRD.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Finally, and I do not think I will get an answer to this — —

Mr McLEAN — I am doing my best.

Mr KOTSIRAS — You still have not outlined some solutions to the problem. You are saying it is a problem — and I understand that — but you have not said that you are putting in place some solutions. Is there going to be any assistance given to those students to lift their aspirations?

Dr GLOVER — A couple of things that we do in relation to local solutions is we feed a whole range of these data back to local networks. Those networks include higher education providers, TAFE providers, schools et cetera. One of the big issues is provision. It is saying, 'What are the aspirations of these young people in terms of their further education and training, and how are we providing that for these young people?'. With these data, what we are finding is much better provision. We have some really good examples in the state where that has occurred and occurred well — for example, Barwon south-west in Geelong is using local data and saying, 'What are the aspirations of these young people? Are we providing it in a proximity?'.

In other parts of the state we are not finding that. The students have to either wait until they can afford to move to Melbourne or they defer their places. Using the data for some local provision issues and local solutions is actually a really important thing, and we do that on an annual basis. In October we will be working with all the networks in the state to give them these data and start to really challenge those local providers. It is not just to provide hairdressing courses for all of these kids but also looking at the employment opportunities and the articulation to university et cetera.

Mr McLEAN — Adding to what Sara said, the government has its managed individual pathway program that provides a pathway plan for every student over 15 years of age in a government school. Through that process, and with the data briefings that Sara has described, there is a dialogue with every student that involves career education, realistic expectation of what study is required to realise that career aspiration and then a reflection on the curriculum offering of schools. There is an ongoing dialogue that is informed by these data briefings with schools to help government schools understand their students, what their aspirations are, what their aspirations could be and

how the curriculum offering of schools and the partnerships that schools enter into with tertiary providers, both TAFE and university, can best serve those pathways. But as far as I am aware the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development has not got any specific actions planned in relation to student support.

The CHAIR — This might be more of a DIIRD issue, but can you tell me if there is an attempt to overlay what we see as future work requirements or skill requirements, both on a state basis but also on a regional basis, against the participation in those various forms of education?

Mr McLEAN — Very much so. I will perhaps outline the policy answer first and then the data and information answer. There is a network of 31 local learning and employment networks. Their task is to support youth transitions. The way they are meant to go about this, the way they do go about it, is to understand employment opportunity in local areas and to provide that advice to schools, TAFEs and other providers such that there is good knowledge locally of what will create good pathways for students into further opportunity, including university.

In terms of state-level policy, in the most recent budget there was additional money put into the vocational education and training bucket to allow schools to purchase from TAFE institutes, as part of student's VCE, a wider range of courses at a price that reflects what TAFE institutes and other registered training organisations actually charge schools for students to do this. So schools will in 2009 have an increased capacity to purchase VET in schools programs that reflect skill needs in particular areas as opposed to what schools could previously afford. Those would be two examples of trying to match delivery to skill profile in a particular area.

Dr GLOVER — I guess there is some sort of puzzling stuff with this in that we know that we have skills shortage, and yet what we are also seeing is the decline in young people taking up TAFE options and an increase in apprenticeships and traineeships, which is a little bit of an overlap there. Traineeships and apprenticeships are part of the TAFE system.

In many respects it is the offerings in the TAFE program that are not always the pathway that young people are choosing to take into a skills career. We are not always seeing the match between what the labour market requires and the particular pathways that young people are choosing to take. A lot of that is because of availability of the particular courses in the particular locations of young people. That is where feeding back this data to the local networks actually allows for a much better provision between schools and those career labour market options.

The CHAIR — So the skill shortage areas that we identify are more associated with the TAFE-type training options than university?

Dr GLOVER — Yes.

Mr DIXON — I have just got a quick question on On Track. What percentage of students do you actually end up contacting, and is it just that next year or is there any further — —

Dr GLOVER — Yes. We have been doing it since 2003. The number that we had last year was 76 per cent — so just over 33 000 young people, which is a fairly significant sample, but nevertheless there are still nearly 25 per cent not participating.

Mr McLEAN — Of the year 12 completers.

Dr GLOVER — Of the year 12 completers. We also have what we call our early leaver On Track, in which we pick up young people who have left from year 10 or year 11, and we actually do two longitudinal studies. We have got our early leaver On Track, and we have been tracking those people longitudinally, and in fact many of our early leavers have very successful pathways into traineeships and apprenticeships and are completing those traineeships and apprenticeships, so there is actually some very good news in terms of good early leaving. And with our year 12 completers we have a longitudinal study in which we try to pick up particular issues so that we can track over time what the successful outcomes are of different options of year 12 completion.

Mr DIXON — I would imagine there would be reasonable change after one year of study; there would be a lot of drop out and change.

Dr GLOVER — Yes. We have also picked up the deferrals. We are really interested in what is happening with the deferrals, and by and large they do return to study. What we are seeing is a pattern of increasing length of deferral, mainly because young people are trying to earn sufficient money to qualify for independent allowance.

The CHAIR — Just so that I am clear about that in my mind, in terms of the On Track data, if there are something in the order of 25 per cent of students who do not participate — I guess it is hard to tell, but in terms of the feelings that you are getting — does that then skew some of those figures? Are more of those people perhaps not in employment?

Dr GLOVER — We have actually done an analysis looking at the sample that we have got and who we have not got, in terms of looking at the overall profile, and there is actually a fairly mixed profile in the ones that we have not got, so it is not a skewed sample with missing data.

The CHAIR — Okay. Good.

Dr GLOVER — We have left you with the full On Track report, which is on a CD. We will be releasing the 2008 report shortly, but that is the full 2007 report for your information.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much. We appreciate that.

Witnesses withdrew.

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Dr D. Woodhouse, executive director, Australian Universities Quality Agency.

The CHAIR — Obviously in terms of the hearings that we have held already there are issues sometimes, particularly with delivery of higher education courses into regional Victoria, that have led us to question how we determine that they still maintain integrity as they move out into running courses with lower numbers or into distance education-type courses, so that has led us to want to learn more about how we determine that the quality of courses offered by our tertiary institutions is still of a sound standard and about the testing or quality assurance process involved. Hence we are pleased to have you along, David, to explain to us what AUQA does and how that might relate to those sorts of issues I have raised.

Dr WOODHOUSE — I thank you for the opportunity to be with you and I apologise that my other colleague was not able to join me today. We have hit several deadlines today and we have a joint project with Melbourne University and New York University and an international network with which she has to work through some things today, but I will mention her later on towards the end, particularly the reason that I hoped that she would be coming with me.

I did produce a PowerPoint presentation which, in line with Karen's advice, I was just going to copy and table for you. When I looked at it this morning I was really not happy with it, so I am just going to refer to two slides in there on the way through. What I am going to work from is this, which I then put together this morning, which I think is then going to take you through better in terms of what you have asked me. Please if at any stage I am telling you stuff you already know, stop me and we will move on faster.

Overheads produced.

Dr WOODHOUSE — In terms of the ownership and structure of AUQA, it was created in 2000 by MCEETYA. It was created to be a national body but not a federal body, and therefore we are set up as a company. We are an independent company; we report to ASIC. We are a not-for-profit company, limited by guarantee, with nine members, effectively shareholders, and those are the ministers with responsibility for higher education. Where does the funding come from? It comes on a formula basis, with each of the governments contributing the base funds. We then charge fees for every audit that we carry out and we earn some funds by providing various services in the QA area, both nationally and internationally. We are much in demand for training and people doing audit and quality assurance in other countries. We have just completed a major project for the government of Bahrain. They wanted a quality agency for their universities that looks like us, and they contracted us to set it up right from scratch.

We have a board of 12 directors. The constitution of the board is set up in the overall constitution and the directors are appointed by the nine members — the nine ministers — and they govern us just like the board of directors governs a company. Under them we have 15 staff. In other words, the board is only a little bit smaller than the number of staff, which is a bit of a curiosity. Of the 15 staff — that is, the number of heads; they are not all full time — one is funded by the World Bank to run the Asia-Pacific quality network out of our office. In the middle of the page there I have put what our mission is:

AUQA is the principal national quality assurance agency in higher education.

Those are not my words; that is not boasting. Those are the words that MCEETYA chose to use: that they established us as the principal national quality assurance agency in higher education, with four specific objectives. I have given them in full there, but I can summarise them.

Objective 1 is that we are to audit the universities and certain other higher education institutions. Our constituency of institutions is in the order of 80 to 100, and if you are interested I can say why I cannot give an exact number. I know exactly how many universities there are, but the non-universities are a slightly fuzzier group. Objective 2 is to audit the nine accreditation agencies — those bodies in each state, territory and the federal government which have external responsibility for the quality of the non-university institutions. We audit those agencies, so we have responsibility for all institutions, in some cases at one removed, through the accreditation agencies. Objective 3 says that we should have a broader QA remit than just carrying out audits. Objective 4 says we should have a broader geographical remit than just Australia.

What is quality audit? I apologise, I should have slipped in a definition there, but this is one of the two slides I would be grateful if you would turn to in PowerPoint. If you turn to page 4, the top left-hand side is headed 'Quality audit', and I should have slipped that definition in. Quality audit is not something that has been made up for the education sector. Quality audit is defined by ISO for any organisation. The quality audit is a process that

starts with the organisation's objectives and then says, 'What are your plans for carrying out those objectives and are those plans suitable for those objectives?'

Then it says, 'Having got those plans, what do you actually do and do your actions conform to those plans? Those actions you have carried out produced certain results and how do those results compare to the objectives you set in the start?'. In the quality area you will constantly hear people using the phrase 'closing the loop'. I am afraid it is a bit of QA jargon, and I keep away from it. In the picture I have just drawn what we are looking for in all institutions is, 'Are you closing the loop from your objectives through this sequence to what results are you getting?'. If we are talking about education, it is just like when you are doing a lesson plan. The way it comes out afterwards is you set objectives and you work through and you produce the result, but it did not come out quite as tidily as that. Similarly auditing an educational institution is not quite as tidy as that, but that is the mental picture we are bringing to them.

But there is a last thing I have not said. Universities or colleges are doing this and then there is checking of results against objectives. What do they do next? That is where the improvement comes in. You are allowed to change your plans — the plan is wrong. You are allowed to change your actions — you did not deploy your plans properly. You are allowed to change your objectives — perhaps your objectives were too ambitious or they were not quite the right ones. But you should be doing something as a result of what you are saying. What we say to institutions is, 'Do this sort of check yourselves first. Do a self-evaluation. Report it to AUQA'. And then there are two things: one, our task becomes a validation or otherwise of what you have found, but the other thing is that you own what you have done much more than if you just sit there and we come in and say, 'You have got this wrong, you have got that wrong'. Instead universities say to us, 'Hey, we have got this wrong'. There is an approach that we introduced part way through the cycle and no other agency that I know of uses it, but every one that I mention it to thinks it is a wonderful idea.

Initially we did the standard thing having produced our reports, and our reports are public and on our website. They would be commendations for things that the institution was doing well and recommendations for things they needed to improve. Because we put this big emphasis on self-review and trying to find out your own problems, after about a year or so I found that institutions were saying to me when we wrote a recommendation, 'Oh, but you cannot make it a recommendation. We found that out ourselves; we already knew that was wrong. That should be a commendation. You should be commending us for finding it out'. And I said, 'I cannot commend you for something that is wrong and that needs attention, but on the other hand I do see what you are saying'. We have introduced a sort of special type of recommendation. We call it an affirmation which is something that the panel has found out is wrong and needs attention, but it wants to categorise it in such a way that says, 'Nonetheless we know you already knew this'. The institutions have responded really well to our taking that into account.

Dropping down to the audit process and how we go about all that. As I said, AUQA has a staff of 15. There is myself, as executive director, and another six staff we call audit directors. One of us is a member of each one of the audit panels. If the audit panel is for a very small institution or organisation there is just the AUQA staff member. But that is unusual; there has only been one instance of that so far. Usually there is anything from one to five other people, drawn from a register of honorary auditors who are academics from Australia, people from business and industry or people from overseas. The process is that we look at this evaluation that the institution has sent. We meet. There is a meeting going on now; it is the panel for Notre Dame university, which is based in Fremantle, as you know, and the panel is considering the submission that they have put in — we call it the performance portfolio — and they will decide on how they are going to pursue the audit.

The first thing to say to you is that the scope of our audit is the whole of the institution. I have to qualify that a little bit because for all the universities we are into a second cycle and our owners MCEETYA have agreed that to maintain variety we can concentrate more on a couple, two or three, areas in the second cycle so we can go deeper. But if we talk about the first cycle we have just completed, we made it very clear the scope was everything done in the university's name, wherever it is done and by whomever it is done. It includes all your regional campuses. If we are auditing Ballarat University, it includes what they are doing through Melbourne Institute of Technology and through Sydney Institute of Technology.

It includes all the partners they have overseas. When we audit a university we have a main audit visit that goes to the university's main campus, but we will by then have visited other operations of that institution. Given the number we cannot possibly visit them all, but we do visit a lot.

This is the other slide I want to draw to your attention. It is the bottom right-hand side on page 5. I have not updated this recently, but already by October last year you can see that in five years of auditing we have visited 94 overseas partnerships, not including the ones around Australia that we visited, but just the ones overseas. It is very intensive, it is expensive too and the federal government recognising the high level of risk involved in overseas operations has given, in addition to the base funding and the audit fees, an extra grant to allow us to do plenty of overseas visiting. It has done that for the last two or three years and the reports are public.

I finish on the third page of my set of notes. The last two bolded headings relate to objectives 3 and 4. Quality enhancement encourages AUQA to be a national authority on quality assurance and we do a lot of other things in addition to the audits. The work we do on audits and the calibre of staff we have mean that we are potentially a source of knowledge and advice on quality assurance and therefore we feel we should build on this and take advantage of it to value-add it for the sector. Therefore we have an annual conference, we have a database of good practice, we produce occasional publications and this is where I wish my colleague Dr Antony Stella — as I was just explaining to Karen, despite the name, she is a female person from India who joined us from the Indian accrediting agency and Antony and Stella are both given names, she does not have a surname and we have to go through this explanation every time — who was responsible, in these occasional publications, for producing one on indigenous issues and what we found on indigenous issues. I am very happy to leave you a copy of that if you wish. That is published and it is on our website in PDF form too.

We are producing and publishing, and Dr Antony Stella has been authoring this as well, a report on community engagement and that will go on our website very soon; and she is producing for and with UNESCO a more general report on equity. Given your interest, the sorts of things that we are saying in here — for example, on community engagement we gave very significant commendations to Deakin University for the work it is doing in community engagement.

I mentioned the good practice database a moment ago and, as I said, our audit reports have commendations. Every few months we go through the audit reports we have published, we look at the commendations and we say, ‘Which of these are potentially useable by other universities?’. Now if you are just commending VU for being a great institution or for having a great VC, that is not transferable in the same way. But if you say, ‘This institution sets up a very good mechanism for reaching out to its local communities’ that might be transferable.

Our good practice database, accessible to anyone on our website, has a lot of good practices that have drawn on the commendations. The way we do that is if we think something is transferable, we write to the university and say, ‘Would you write this up in a way that can be intelligible to other people’. You will see on there, for example, that these are some of the things on the good practice database. We commend Charles Darwin University for its secondary school liaison person; Deakin University for the way it reaches out to its regional and rural communities, and of course the details would be in there; Edith Cowan University for its partnerships; and La Trobe University for running its course advisory committees in such a way as to enhance the appropriateness of courses to the needs of relevant external communities while maintaining academic standards.

Those are some of the things we have looked at and talked about in terms of community engagement. In the indigenous area we also felt that the Institute of Koorie Education at Deakin was a very good model and you will find that is commended on the good practice database. James Cook University is providing good research training opportunities for indigenous students and has a good employment record for indigenous academic staff.

Finally, objective 4 encourages us to be active internationally in quality assurance and there is an international network of quality assurance agencies like AUQA. Currently we have over 200 members worldwide; obviously on every continent — hordes of them on every continent. I am currently president of that network and, as I mentioned earlier, there is a regional Asia Pacific quality network. The administration of that is funded by the World Bank which employs a person who works out of my office to administer that. That is probably a whole lot more than you ever wanted to know.

The CHAIR — No, that is very useful indeed.

Mr DIXON — On minor distance education, it is obviously something you would assess. What do you find in Australia? What is the quality of it and its delivery across Australia?

Dr WOODHOUSE — The background to understanding is that part of the problem when Karen invited me to talk to you was that I felt that the terms of reference of your investigation as I saw them were a little bit

narrow for me to be able to help you. If you ask a question like that, if I can say what we look at in distance education generally I am on better ground than if I have to say how distance education is looking within Victoria, for example.

Mr DIXON — Sure.

Dr WOODHOUSE — To answer it in broad, we look very carefully at distance education and we would feel that on the whole it is being done well because a lot of institutions in going overseas have recognised that this is where they need to build on their distance education expertise and so whatever they develop, even if they develop it primarily to take overseas, they are still doing it onshore as well. Of course, as you know there are probably four main distance education providers here where we really look at the distance education provision very closely.

The CHAIR — Following on from that question, what are the components that make our distance education programs perhaps better than some others overseas?

Dr WOODHOUSE — It varies because there is Deakin, Charles Sturt, University of Southern Queensland, and University of New England which are the ones. I am not telling tales out of school because all these reports are on the web. You would find that we were somewhat more critical of UNE. We feel that USQ has a very good system. The person who has been heading its distance education for some years has been an international leader in distance and flexible learning, Jim Taylor, and they have a system where if we just look at student enrolments, we cannot even tell where they are, they are just about all enrolled at Toowoomba. It looks amazing because the place is irrelevant and they really have reached out through electronic means.

Deakin University also does a very good job, and we have commended them for the way in which they have developed their materials. They have been known for good distance education materials from before really we even thought so much about the electronic way of providing them and I would see their strength as the nature of the materials that they produce and the way they interact with their communities.

Charles Sturt is serving, very well, a very widespread regional population and gets over the spread of the population around the state of New South Wales by being able to offer them well-produced distance materials, well disseminated and on the whole well supported.

The CHAIR — How does the use of online activity fit into this?

Dr WOODHOUSE — All of them use online activity to some extent and in fact institutions are moving more towards talking not so much about offsite or distance compared with onsite or face-to-face, but talking about flexible education. University of South Australia is one that comes particularly to mind for me here because they have students who just enrol in different units in whichever mode the student wishes for the different units. One student can be enrolled face-to-face for this unit and by distance for another one just because they think, 'That is fine, the place and those times are not convenient for me so I will do it from home'.

Where an institution is oriented this way, materials are available in either of the two modes so the online can be used as an alternative or it can be used as a support. I could enrol face-to-face, and if I am a bit unsure of myself I could go to the classes and I could also be working through the online stuff to support me.

The CHAIR — I suppose I want to ask the reverse question to the one I asked before. What are some of the components that might lead some of the distance education delivery to be unsuccessful or not viewed well by students and therefore there are poor completion rates? Have we identified some of those factors?

Dr WOODHOUSE — If you are still in basically the written mode, you are mailing stuff out, that works, but it is a bit slow and so on. Clearly we are talking now where there might be a certain amount of mailing out but there is a lot of online. If you are setting up an online system, you need to know that your students are going to have access to the sort of facilities that will allow them to make use of it. Do they have the right bandwidth? Do they have the right computers and so on?

So one of the problems is producing something and saying, 'You can have this' and the students at the other end are finding that they do not have the technical facilities necessary to access it.

A related issue is that if you are a face-to-face student you would think in terms of your use of the library. If you are a distance education student, do you have adequate access to the library electronically? That is something else that is not necessarily a function of a lack of technical capacity at the student's end, but a lack of provision by the institution of electronic access to the library materials that you might expect. So that is the second thing.

A third thing is the ease of access to academic support by the student. Can they get the feedback from the lecturers, from the tutors and so on that they need?

And I suppose a fourth thing is that although we are moving away from the notion that a campus experience is the only possible mode of university, nonetheless if you are out very much by yourself or in a different culture there may not be the ancillary support for the university activity that the student gets here.

Whether you are just all by yourself way up in the middle of the Northern Territory or whether there are quite a few of you but you are in the middle of Cambodia and remote from this notional Australian experience you are supposed to be gaining — I am not making a big deal here of the Australian experience, 'You must be here and there, we will go to the footy' and so on — but just away from the more general university attractions, that there are just a few of you talking Khmer all the time except when you are typing into your computer. So there is a remoteness and a lack of a feeling of being a part of this educational activity you are supposed to be engaged in.

Those would be the four things I would say we look at particularly closely because they are very easy to miss.

The CHAIR — Just before I go to Martin, in relation to the last point you raised in terms of that social challenge, what are some of the universities able to do — the ones that are doing good things — to be able to help students in remote areas to feel more linked in with university life or the key aspects that help them to feel that they are gaining through their course?

Dr WOODHOUSE — Providing more online discussion activities that are not just question-and-answer relating to the course, but something that is a little bit more broadening and if it is at all possible providing more means for the students to get together to talk to each other. A lot of particularly overseas distance education we see as being supported distance. Although notionally it is set up as totally distant, the university may well have an arrangement with a partner on the ground where the partner is expected to provide some interaction with those students who might come into a group from time to time.

Mr DIXON — You mentioned Deakin and their Koori education community is a good example. Are there other universities that are doing good things with equity groups that you are aware of that are worthwhile looking at?

Dr WOODHOUSE — Certainly I just picked one or two; I did not want to bore you with a long list. But in our indigenous report there you will see that we commended a number of them: the indigenous centre, University of Canberra for the Ngannawal Centre. Southern Cross University is particularly noticeable. They have really linked it into the local community. That is a place where you go and you are really conscious that the local elders have been involved in setting up a centre at the university that they are really comfortable with. The University of Melbourne is in Melbourne. It could just as easily be 300 miles away, if you see what I mean. Whereas the SCU is, in terms of the indigenous linkage, very much the indigenous link there with those people.

Charles Darwin University is another; that would not surprise you; Central Queensland University — again we commended their indigenous centre; University of New South Wales — the Nura Gili Indigenous centre tries to reach out to secondary school students to try and enhance the access and really get them oriented towards at least coming in for a start.

We look at the equity indicators. As we move into cycle 2 audits, we are putting more pressure on the universities to provide us with enhanced data as evidence of what it is they are doing. To match that, AUQA employed last November an in-house statistician; and now whenever we are coming into an audit he does a fairly extensive analysis of the data we have available and then runs through it with the staff.

We then present it to the audit panel who are able to look at the way the institution is tracking on access, participation, success, attrition, retention and so on; and see where the university is tracking in relation to the cohort, to the state, to the whole sector and ask questions: 'You spiked up there. That was great but why? Was it just chance?'. This is part of this 'What are your procedures?' and 'How are you rolling them out?'. We want to see

that a good result was actually a result of some systematic and purposeful activity rather than a chance that is going to go the other way next year.

The CHAIR — In relation to TAFE, do you evaluate universities offering TAFE courses? I am interested to get some feedback on those institutions that are obviously dual institutions in that case. What are the general issues you have found in terms of quality maintenance?

Dr WOODHOUSE — You are going to find this is a very partial answer but I am smiling and before I finish, I will tell you why I am smiling. Our objective one — and we have revised objects, they are not quite the same as we ran on the first cycle but nonetheless the objective essentially right from the start said audit universities — given that the TAFE parts of dual sector institutions were already subject to an external audit regime, through the first cycle I took the view that it was not fair to just come along and say, ‘We’ve been told to audit this university so we are going to do the whole thing’. It is just tough if it is duplicating something else.

What we have done in the first cycle with the RMITs, Swinburne, Charles Darwin — Charles Darwin and Bachelor and the four in Victoria are essentially the main dual sector institutions — in each case we have said we will audit the higher education sector and the overlap. We do not want anything to fall between the cracks. So at Charles Darwin, for example, you find that they are so integrated the head of a department can be from the VET sector or the higher education sector, and we have a recommendation in our report that relates to that. We have actually slipped a fair way over into TAFE there because that was the nature of the thing but we did not ask the detailed-type questions, and they have had their own TAFE compliance audit.

What we have said to institutions all along is, ‘We are willing to collaborate with the relevant TAFE entity if you think that will be helpful to you’. I think in the first cycle the institutions thought it was easier just to keep the things separate.

But when we made the offer again at the beginning of this cycle — we have already audited Swinburne this year and the report will be out next week — we said, ‘Would you like us to do a joint audit?’. It said, ‘No, thank you. We see our higher education and TAFE as quite separate. We are happy to have them audited separately’. RMIT said, ‘Yes, please’.

At the moment — and the reason I am smiling is because I have a meeting at 2 o’clock with RMIT, ourselves and VRQA. It is one of a series where RMIT has said, ‘Yes, please’, VRQA has said, ‘Yes, we are happy to collaborate with you’, and now we are working out how that collaboration works and if it can work in such a way that ultimately it is better for the institution than having two separate ones. In principle it should be, but in practice it is going to depend on how we can make it work.

The CHAIR — Are there any universities in Victoria that would not have been evaluated by AUQA?

Dr WOODHOUSE — No, we have completed the whole of the first cycle in the middle of last year.

The CHAIR — How long does a cycle take?

Dr WOODHOUSE — Five to six years.

The CHAIR — Thank you. That has given us a good perspective of what AUQA does. Obviously we can look on the website to get further information and further detail in regard to specific reports and issues.

Dr WOODHOUSE — There is plenty there. Thanks so much.

Witness withdrew.

CORRECTED VERSION

EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE (SUB-COMMITTEE)

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

Melbourne — 23 July 2008

Members of the Sub-Committee

Mr M. Dixon

Mr G. Howard

Mr N. Elasmarr

Mr N. Kotsiras

Mr P. Hall

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Committee Administrative Officer: Ms N. Tyler

Witnesses

Mr S. Hamilton, chief executive officer, and

Ms J. Baker, manager, policy and projects, Open Universities Australia.

The CHAIR — Welcome, Stuart and Janet. It is very good to have you here. Obviously in terms of our inquiries we are interested in a number of issues associated with distance education and opportunities for people who live in more remote areas gaining access to higher education. We are certainly interested to learn more about Open Universities Australia. It was only a week ago we were out at Swinburne, at its Lilydale campus, so we were introduced to some aspects of Open Universities there, but we look forward to your spoken submission first and then we will be pleased to follow up with some questions.

Mr HAMILTON — I am Stuart Hamilton. I am the CEO of Open Universities Australia. Janet Baker is our manager of policy and projects. We will just do a very brief introduction just in case you do not know, but I will not waste too much time on Open Universities Australia. We are a private company, not for profit, owned by seven universities, three of which happen to be Victorian universities — RMIT, Monash and Swinburne — plus a university based in Sydney, Brisbane, Adelaide and Perth — Curtin, UniSA, Macquarie and Griffith. We provide access to courses from those universities and from around eight other tertiary providers, such as La Trobe University, which I think is the only other Victorian provider. There is Australian Catholic University, but I do not think that is via the Melbourne bit.

We provide access to students to selected courses from all those universities. Students do not have to have ENTERs, they do not have to have any particular qualifications to get into most of our first-year undergraduate courses. It is open in the sense of not needing an ENTER score. It is also open in the sense that we have four study periods a year, each of 13 weeks, so we are open all the time. You can start when you like and just study for a study period, rest, study another study period, and pick it up and what have you — it is open in that sense.

We try to keep our prices relatively affordable for undergraduate units. You are paying slightly or significantly, depending on the course, less than if you had a HECS-funded, commonwealth-funded university place. Postgraduate would be more expensive, but roughly what you might pay for a postgraduate unit.

We have grown significantly in the last three years. In 2004 we had around 24 000 enrolments annually from about 10 000 to 12 000 students. We are now getting on to 70 000 enrolments from just under 30 000 students. We tend to count in terms of enrolments because students come and go, study one unit here, two units there. So the ‘full-time equivalent’ or that dreadful word ‘load’ that universities use, as if students were a burden, we do not tend to think in those terms because it does not make much sense for us.

We have grown significantly. We have a much wider range of courses. Students can study just individual units or can study towards full degrees. They can pick up subjects. If they try to study on campus and did not quite yet there, they can complete through us after they have got a job or family responsibilities or whatever. Or vice versa, they can start with us and perhaps go on campus later or they can just do a few units with us, or they can do a whole degree with us.

You end up with a degree from one of our partner universities. So you end up with a Monash degree, an RMIT degree, a Swinburne degree rather than an Open Universities degree. To the extent there is any thought that Open Universities is not quite the real thing, our degrees are the real thing. They are the same thing as for the universities, because the universities offer them. We provide additional support for students, but the students get the same content that they get if they went on campus.

We certainly provide all across Australia — to some extent internationally but mainly Australian students. I would not pretend that we have a particular focus on distance education. Distance education is the traditional term for it but really a student could be living and working next door to Monash campus in Clayton. Clayton being a big employment area, quite possibly we have many students who live and work in Clayton.

Ms BAKER — Or in the university?

Mr HAMILTON — Even at the university, indeed. They just do not find it convenient to go on campus because even though universities are far more flexible these days than they used to be in terms of times of lectures and tutorials, it is still not possible for people to get away from work or family responsibilities, so it is really the flexibility, the openness, the fact that you can do it in your own time, at your own pace, in your own home — or if you can get away with it, during working hours — that really is what our offer is all about.

We obviously do have students, though, from rural and regional Australia and Victoria — not particularly more than in metropolitan areas. In fact slightly more students, proportionate to population, would be metropolitan-based

than are distance-based. I will give you the figures for Victoria. In metropolitan Australia we have 1.58 students for every 1000 of population, whereas in outer regional Victoria, as defined by the ABS, we have 0.91; and in inner regional, 1. As you can see, there is a slight bias towards the city. You can speculate on why that might be so — for a range of reasons perhaps — but the fact is there is no barrier to people from rural and remote Australia and Victoria coming to our classes. The only possible barrier really is broadband access.

The CHAIR — Yes. I was going to raise that.

Mr HAMILTON — That is a matter we have taken up with the federal government obviously. In fact I had a conversation with the federal minister about that just recently and he is very much alive to the fact that access to education is one of the key reasons to get a rolling out of broadband network. It is probably the single thing I would be focusing on in terms of remote access and rural access to our services. It is not a huge issue in rural Victoria but it can be an issue, particularly as we are looking to have a richer online experience for our students — have more discussion forums, more tasks that have to be performed online, where you need that broader band.

Ms BAKER — Audio and video streaming.

Mr HAMILTON — Video streaming and what have you, yes.

So we have tried from time to time — I am getting more now to the rural and regional issues — to see whether it would provide better access if we had learning centres in regional Australia, in other words places people would come to to get together and discuss their work, possibly to get access, if they cannot from home, and certainly to get exam supervision.

We have found that other than for the last of those functions, there is not really a huge demand for that. In a way it is not surprising, because these are people in our market we call ‘time-poor working adults’ — in other words people who because of work or family commitments just have not got the time to go on campus, as I said before. If they have not got the time to do that, they probably have not got the time or inclination to go to a learning centre.

So even though we have from time to time looked at that option and have sometimes been under pressure from local councils and local learning networks et cetera, who say, ‘Why not be part of establishing a learning network in this city?’, the experience is they do not make much difference to access to our kinds of courses because of the nature of our kinds of students.

The only time our students actually have to go somewhere other than where they are — unless they are doing a particular unit, like nursing, where they have to go to Whyalla, interestingly enough, to do their practicums, or bioscience, where they have to go into a lab in the city to do some particular units at RMIT — the only time most students who are not doing those sorts of courses need to actually leave their home or workplace is for an exam, if there is an exam. We have a system of — to use the technical term — invigilation — where they have got to find someone who the university agrees is a respectable person in the community with whom they can sit an exam. That might be in the local library, or it might be the local pastor et cetera.

Mr DIXON — We get a few at the office actually.

Mr HAMILTON — Exactly. We do use some learning centres for that. There is a network in Queensland called Learning Network Queensland that we have used for many years as local hubs, but I must admit they have not been enormously used by our students.

Ms BAKER — No. The Learning Network Queensland experience is quite interesting. They expanded rapidly across the state but they contracted significantly the number of places they actually have learning centres in, for the reasons Stuart was alluding to — that there was less demand than they imagined for learning centres.

Mr HAMILTON — When I first got into this job and looked at Learning Network Queensland it seemed to me on the face of it to provide a great model across Australia. It does have the best network by far. There are some in New South Wales, there are what they call telecentres in WA. There is nothing really like that in Victoria, and I thought that would be a problem but it does not prove so. Our rural numbers in Victoria are better than any other state, so it is not really an issue. There may be good reason for them but from our point of view they are not particularly necessary for access to our sort of study.

I could go on but that is probably all I want to say in advance. I have got those figures if you are interested in the rural coverage of our courses. When I looked again at our written submission, I saw it probably did not give the most helpful figures in relation to that, so I am happy to table those.

The CHAIR — All right. Let us move to questions.

Mr DIXON — How many, or what proportion of your students, are school leavers rather than adults as such?

Mr HAMILTON — There are plenty, but the mode age, if you like, is probably the high 20s, early 30s. This year we have actually got a higher proportion of people in their early to late 20s than we had in the past, and we rather think that is because with the economic conditions people of mortgage-paying age are just feeling a bit more stretched. People in their 30s and 40s are less looking at discretionary spending, but people in their 20s are coming to us more. We have not really fully analysed this yet. I am not sure I have the actual figures with me right now, or in my head, but I would probably say if we are talking 16 to 20, as the school leaver age, that would be probably 10 per cent of our students.

Ms BAKER — A little less than that.

Mr HAMILTON — About 8 or 9 per cent.

Ms BAKER — And of those it tends towards the older, rather than the direct school leavers.

Mr HAMILTON — That is right. We have a very small number of people who are at school studying with us, doing university advantage-type programs. Often the home schooling community, interestingly, sees a connection with us, but they are very small numbers I am talking about.

Mr DIXON — Which leads on to my next question. What financial assistance is available for students who attend Open University?

Mr HAMILTON — The main thing is access to FEE-HELP. As long as they are Australian citizens they will get access to FEE-HELP in the way that anyone with a full-fee-paying place at a higher education institution can. We have had confirmation from the federal government that even though it is removing full-fee-paying places from public universities next year, FEE-HELP will remain for Open University students.

Around 70 per cent of our students take the FEE-HELP option rather than pay up front. We do have a small number of scholarships, academic scholarships, for undergraduate and post-graduate students, and an indigenous scholarship, but FEE-HELP is the main way we do it — and obviously they pay it back eventually if they earn. There is no subsidy however, other than the implicit subsidy of the interest-free loan. There is no federal subsidy. They do pay the full fees, one way or the other.

The CHAIR — So am I right in assuming that all of your students would need access to broadband or are there alternatives with written materials?

Mr HAMILTON — Mostly. Not all our courses are fully online. I think all our courses probably have some online element but it is possibly fairly minor in some of them. There are still some that are largely print based. We are moving away from that but it is still there. There have been a couple of courses where we have tried to keep a print-only option available, particularly a study skills course; it is the very first one where we have had a print-only and an online-only option offered in the last couple of years.

We try to keep those options open and if a student is studying and there is a particular course where they cannot get online access, we will try to negotiate some access for them with the university. But our basic advice to students is: you need at least email access, and it depends on the course how broad the band has to be. If there are a lot of online assignments, video conferencing et cetera, obviously you do need good online access, but there will be other courses where you probably do not need quite as broad an access.

For students with disabilities of course we have got special arrangements; if they have got disabilities which mean they cannot interact with a computer.

The CHAIR — What backup is then provided, beyond the academic materials as such, for students who might be undertaking courses by way of having some ability to discuss with somebody else the nature of the material and get some direct feedback and to answer their questions?

Mr HAMILTON — There are a few things. They have access to university-appointed tutors who will conduct probably online-centred discussions with them. They will be able to submit assignments to a special service we have got called Smarthinking, which enables them, separate from their eventually submitted assignment and marked assignment, to get advice on the organisation of the essay and that sort of thing and is provided as an additional service.

There is the capacity to have online, student-only discussion groups, either through the university or, if they want to keep totally separate from the university, we host discussion forums on our own website. So there is plenty of opportunity for student-to-student interaction and student-to-tutor interaction. We emphasise one-on-many on the tutor-to-student ratio just to get the economies of scale obviously, to make the model work.

Ms BAKER — If they need administrative assistance, Open Universities has a team of student advisers.

Mr HAMILTON — Yes, we have advisers who do not get onto the academic side but if students need advice on trouble they are having with operational problems— advice on next units of study, that sort of thing — we have got a team who are on the phone.

The CHAIR — So do they become students of Open Universities Australia or do they become students of Swinburne or one of the member universities?

Mr HAMILTON — It is a yes and no to both of those. We slip through the system, dodging arrangements very carefully.

The CHAIR — So it could be either?

Mr HAMILTON — Strictly, they are studying units through us which will give them credit towards a degree at that university — 24 units to an undergraduate degree. They study individual units as a student, external to those universities.

The CHAIR — And those individual units are linked to a particular university.

Mr HAMILTON — That is right — one or other of them. Eventually, if they have studied the right structure — and we advise them on that right structure; it is all set out on a website and in our handbook — they end up with 24 credits and they can rock up to the relevant university and say, ‘We appear to have all the credits for a degree at your university’, and the university says, ‘Yes, you do’.

That is a bit cute; it has all been organised that way. But from a technical point of view, until they are registered with that university their intention to take out the degree — which technically they do not need to do until they have all the credits; we actually advise them to do it about a third of the way through just so they make sure they are getting the right structure — they are not formally a student of that university. But they are assured of credit for all the study, because that is the deal we have with the universities.

Mr DIXON — So can they do units from various universities?

Mr HAMILTON — Absolutely.

Mr DIXON — Who decides in the end which degree? Which university do they get their degree from? Is it just the majority?

Mr HAMILTON — In regard of the degree-offering university we have an academic programs committee which sets out the agreement between all the partners about cross-crediting. To give an example, if someone wants to do the business degree, the Bachelor of Business Studies at Monash — that is, if you like, our core, straight business degree — they might decide they might decide they want to do a little more business law, a bit more of a legal take to that than the Monash degree centrally provides, so they will take some extra business law units from Curtin.

Ms BAKER — As their electives.

Mr HAMILTON — Curtin happens to offer up a business law degree through us. But the core business law unit, which is actually in the core of the Monash degree, is not the Monash business law unit, it is Curtin business law unit, because Monash has agreed that there will be that cross over. Vice versa, Curtin's business/law offering will take some management units from Monash. At both the level of the structure of the degree and the electives, there is a lot of cross-accreditation. The student does not have to worry about that. It is all agreed in advance. That is the power of our consortium, if you like.

Ms BAKER — This is legislatively recognised in the Higher Education Support Act, which consistently talks about higher education providers and Open Universities Australia.

Mr HAMILTON — It recognises us as an exception because we are unique in that. That is the only way you can do that sort of mixing and matching without having to negotiate it yourself as an individual student.

Mr DIXON — When was it set up?

Mr HAMILTON — As a company, 1993.

The CHAIR — What percentage of your courses would be undergraduate as opposed to postgraduate courses in terms of numbers of students?

Mr HAMILTON — In terms of numbers of students, over 90 per cent are undergraduates, but we are growing in terms of our numbers of postgraduate students. In the last couple of years we have doubled each year in postgraduates, so that is growing significantly. The number of our post-graduate degrees is now actually approaching the number of undergraduate degrees. We are not talking about research degrees; we are talking about coursework.

The CHAIR — In terms of completion rates, what percentage after starting some units with Open Universities would go on to complete degrees?

Mr HAMILTON — That is very hard to know because we do not negotiate the degree completion. That is the student and the university, so we do not necessarily get told. We look at a record of the student, and we see they have got 20 units, and they have stopped studying with us. We rather suspect they have already got four units somewhere else and have gone on and got their degree. But unless they tell us or the university tells us, we do not necessarily know, because they are not getting a degree from us. We are just a pathway for them. We keep trying to work out a way of finding that out, but we have not cracked that one yet.

Ms BAKER — The Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations is trying to crack a way of finding that as well.

Mr HAMILTON — It is a tricky one. Every time I brief a new federal minister in particular and they ask me about retention, they watch me wriggle. It is not that I have got anything to hide, it is just that I actually do not know the answer to the question.

The CHAIR — There is a long time lag, too. It is 10 years from start to — —

Mr HAMILTON — They can take credit for something they have done 10 years ago; that is right. What I can talk about is year-on-year retention and how many students come back after doing one or two units in one year. Roughly half will keep going the next year. That will attrite each year. On average a student who does a unit with us will probably do two to three to four units. That does not mean they have not done what they wanted to do. They possibly only wanted to one or two units. There are others who want to do all 24. The majority of our students only do three, four, five units with us.

The CHAIR — What percentage might go and do an entire degree of Open University units?

Mr HAMILTON — I really would be guessing, for the reasons I have said.

The CHAIR — It would pretty low, but less than 10 per cent anyway?

Mr HAMILTON — It probably would.

Ms BAKER — There are privacy restrictions on universities giving that information back to us.

Mr HAMILTON — Our fundamental purpose is to provide access to units of learning, to help students do that and, if they wish, to build it up into degrees. Our business is not degree issuing. It is not the space we are in. Nevertheless, we are as curious — and even more so — as you. We would like to know.

Mr DIXON — Are you aware of similar operations in other countries?

Mr HAMILTON — There is similar but nothing quite like us. Most other countries that have open universities have freestanding open universities. The Open University, so-called — that is, the Open University of the UK — is probably the most well known. That is a freestanding university, which issues its own degrees. It is actually more blended than fully distance education, because students have to come to learning centres of one sort or another to do a lot of their coursework. Their openness is more about open access rather than the distance.

Ms BAKER — There is restricted open access, because the Open University has prerequisites and we do not.

Mr HAMILTON — Yes, that is right. There is a whole network of open universities in India. There is the Open Polytechnic of New Zealand, but there is not strict open university, even though Massey University has some elements of it. There are some consortiums in the United States and in Canada, but they tend to be much looser consortiums and they are mainly a sort of a marketing front-end rather than anything that gets into the nitty-gritty of arranging credit in the way we do. We have not found anything that has quite like us anywhere else in the world.

The CHAIR — Now there are a number of universities offering distance education type courses. If I lived in the regions, how would I determine whether I might want to do a course through Deakin University or whatever or Open Universities? What are the sorts of things that are different? Is it the courses that are on offer or the means of delivery?

Mr HAMILTON — With Deakin obviously you have got to get a commonwealth subsidised place. Or if they offer any full fee-paying distance places, you have to get in, so there is a quota; there is an entry system. With us there is not an entry system, provided you do not want to do nursing or teacher education or MBAs. You just rock up and enrol — that is probably the most significant difference.

There is the range of courses on offer obviously. They need to decide whether we have got what they want or whether Deakin or Charles Sturt or any of the other providers have. In terms of the learning experience, it will probably be quite similar. Our university is providing the same sort of online support that a Deakin or a Charles Sturt or a Southern Queensland will be providing.

Ms BAKER — It is administratively more flexible. Still universities have become more flexible but if you decide you no longer want to stay, and you are in semester 1 and you no longer want to study in semester 2 for family or a personal or workplace reasons, you have to go through the process of applying for deferral and so forth.

Mr HAMILTON — Whereas with us, it is just a case of you study when you want to study. You enrol a study period at a time. You do not have to enrol for the reasons that we talked about earlier. You do not enrol for a full degree with us. You just enrol for the first unit or two or three — how ever many you want to do.

The CHAIR — If I am part way through a unit, can I hold off and finish it in another term?

Mr HAMILTON — No, once you pass the census date — the cut-off date which is a couple of weeks into the semester — you have paid your money and that is it. You can withdraw and possibly without academic penalty if you do it soon enough; possibly without financial penalty if you do it soon enough but otherwise you have to start again.

Mr DIXON — What recommendations would you like us to make that would help you?

Mr HAMILTON — I think if you are convinced of the issue from us and from others — that whole issue of broadband access — I know it is principally a federal issue but nevertheless that is probably the most useful one I would suggest.

The CHAIR — You are making a submission to the federal inquiry?

Mr HAMILTON — As I say, I have been talking to the minister directly but I certainly will be, yes. That is probably the main one. There really are not significant issues at the state government level that strike us as a barrier to our sort of access for our sort of students. There are issues that are in our hands, like improving the access to students taking exams, providing different alternatives to students — a wider range of courses — but I do not think there is an area where the state government needs to be involved in that sort of thing.

Mr DIXON — I knew you vaguely existed and that was it. I have learnt a hell of a lot today but I would imagine there would be a lot of people out in the community — schools and careers counsellors and all sorts of people — who just do not know that you exist. Is that an issue for you?

Mr HAMILTON — Yes, I think we have been a little bit of a well-kept secret over the years. Our rebranding, to use the market jargon, from Open Learning to Open Universities Australia has done a fair bit because ‘Open Learning’ sounds a bit mysterious and hard. ‘Open Universities’ is I think a more presentable name. We are doing TV advertising which is actually all about raising awareness. It helps get more people enrolled but it is actually all about getting a greater knowledge. We are doing a lot of local media stories based on nice success stories of individual students in local communities which are running in local newspapers quite a bit.

So it is beginning to get out there and we have found word-of-mouth is the best way. The media is all very well but we find successful students who tell their family and friends is the way it happens. So it tends to be a little bit of an almost subterranean story about Open Universities and that is fine with us. We are not promoting the organisation as an organisation.

Ms BAKER — We are certainly well represented in the federal government websites and publications.

Mr HAMILTON — Going to uni and all of that. I guess a student at school, with all the pressure to get the university place, see that as the focus. It sounds a bit odd to be thinking about us when the move is always through to on-campus. We are not really designed for the school-leaver market. I have always thought that the campus experience is still something that is valued and for a school-leaver it is probably the appropriate one.

The CHAIR — Yes, absolutely.

Mr HAMILTON — We pick up quite a few people but it is not really the focus of our market.

The CHAIR — I notice in your submission to us that you included comments in regard to refugees and people with migrant backgrounds, and I am interested to know whether any of your courses are particularly tailored towards either refugees, migrant background people or indigenous students?

Mr HAMILTON — For indigenous students certainly we have a range of particular courses through the University of South Australia.

Ms BAKER — Yes, and the Australian Catholic University.

Mr HAMILTON — That are targeted at indigenous learning. We have an indigenous scholarship also. We have some particular support for people who need to brush up on their English language skills before they start with us in Macquarie University online English language preparation course. We have study skills units which are all about people who have not studied at tertiary level before or in an Anglo-Saxon education environment.

They are for people that need help getting their minds into the right space to study in an Australian university through just-in-time study skills courses, or units which you actually get credit for but which we recommend to people who have not got a background in Australian-style education. They study at the higher levels before they start the actual units, and they are at two or three different levels depending upon the background of people.

There is one at Swinburne, one is at the University of South Australia and one is through Murdoch, which are differently targeted at different learning skills and learning backgrounds. So to some extent those ones are targeted.

Ms BAKER — We have offered some scholarships in the Thai-Burma refugee community and our experience — —

Mr HAMILTON — On the Thai border.

Ms BAKER — Because of the lack of any higher education for that particular group — they are not allowed to go to higher education in Thailand. So we are working with that and our experience coalesces our ideas that people of non-English speaking background, both here and internationally, need many more stepping stones towards higher education rather than going straight in.

Even our study skills units were a stretch for them. Because we speak as we say, we are developing something we are calling 'prepac', which just means preparation for academic studies. It has a particular orientation for people whose language and background is not English, and whose cultural background is not Australia. That is actually something that we are trialling with a group of students there and refining what we are doing.

Mr HAMILTON — With the thought that it might be more widely used for local production in Australia.

The CHAIR — That is very interesting. Thank you very much, Stuart and Janet. That has certainly opened up our understanding of what you do and is very helpful.

Mr HAMILTON — Obviously if there are any questions that you have in preparing your report, we are always able to answer any questions. Thank you very much.

Witnesses withdrew.

CORRECTED VERSION

EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE (SUB-COMMITTEE)

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

Melbourne — 23 July 2008

Members of the Sub-Committee

Mr M. Dixon

Mr G. Howard

Mr N. Elasmar

Mr N. Kotsiras

Mr P. Hall

Chair: Mr G. Howard

Deputy Chair: Mr N. Kotsiras

Staff

Executive Officer: Ms K. Ellingford

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

Committee Administrative Officer: Ms N. Tyler

Witness

Ms B. Stubbs, principal, Distance Education Centre Victoria.

The CHAIR — Welcome, Bronwyn. Thank you for coming and adding your advice to us in regard to what Distance Education Centre Victoria does. You are aware that we are looking at those issues of education for people who might live more remotely from the physical higher education centres. We are interested to know how Distance Education Centre might fit into those areas that our inquiry is looking into.

If you want to lead off and let us know a little about what you do and so on, and then we will have some questions to follow up with.

Ms STUBBS — Just as a bit of a background to Distance Education Centre Victoria, in 2008 we have an EFT — an equivalent full-time enrolment — of 1283 students. That actually converts into 3788 bodies. This was as of March this year. The reason that there is the disparity is that a student who is enrolled in one subject is counted as 0.2 of a student, so five real bodies, each doing one subject, will be one EFT, if that makes sense. About half of our cohort is at 11 and 12, and about half of that again is non-school based, so they are totally our students, and the other half are mostly students in other schools who are accessing one subject.

In the country in this current year we have 477 who are non-school — that is, they are totally ours, they are distance education; we are doing all of their educational provision — and we have 939 who are school-based. These are real numbers, not EFT. That compares with, in the metropolitan area, 676 non-school — so there is a greater number non-school based — totally our students who are in the metropolitan area, and there are fewer school-based in the metropolitan area; there are only 843. So the greater percentage of our school-based provision is to rural and regional Victoria.

The CHAIR — How many did you say are school-based in rural Victoria?

Ms STUBBS — School-based? It is 939.

Enrolment categories are: medical — and that could be physical medical conditions or it could be social and emotional; increasingly it is social and emotional. We have travellers. They might be travelling around the block with their family — so going around Australia on that traditional trip; they tend to be primary students. They could be students of itinerant workers. We have got circus performers — you name it, we have got it. They could in fact be on interstate work — so where a family transfers to Sydney for six months they might continue with us on the educational provision, particularly at years 11 and 12, so that there is continuity of the curriculum — or they might be overseas; they have transferred overseas. There are a whole range of things there.

School referral is another category that tends to be, particularly in metropolitan areas, where a student has been expelled from a school on a number of occasions. In rural and regional Victoria, because there are not the number of schools to move around, it could be that there is an issue within the town that actually alienates a child. The child who has been the victim of something tends to be the one who comes onto us rather than the perpetrator. There is a whole range of issues that I will not get into that causes that to be the case. Wherever there are circumstances and there is a lack of alternative schooling opportunities, that tends to be the school referral category.

Students in regular schools, who are just accessing one or maybe two subjects because either the school does not provide it or there is a timetable clash we have an increasing number of over the year because if there is a teacher who gets sick and cannot be replaced, then we take over that provision. That tends to be an issue particularly in rural and regional areas where teachers to backfill those positions are not necessarily readily available. We have some very niche subjects as well — philosophy, a whole range of things. We have probably got the largest range of subject provision of any school in the state, regardless of size. We run dance — you name it, we run it, except for theatre studies, drama, text and traditions. That has a political historical background to do with the Brethren. We have not got involved in some of those.

We have an 'other' category, and that is for elite sporting performers whose training regime does not enable them to do that. That can be footballers, students going to the Olympics — that is Paralympics as well as the normal Olympics.

We have artists, ballet performers, victims of family violence who have to be mobile — so they had to move — and where they are in refuges; we have provision with some of the refuges so that students can continue their education, and particularly if there are circumstances where students could be found by vexatious or stalking parents at a school, they will frequently come on to us in the other category. Students with any reason not to be able to attend a mainstream school come to us.

Then there are adults. Adults who are returning to schooling come on to us through an arrangement with OTTE about funding, and they can do VCE subjects with us. They tend to be in rural and regional Victoria because they still have to meet the same criteria. If they are distant from a TAFE and therefore cannot enrol in a TAFE for VCE subjects then they can come on with us.

We deliver in print, on CD and online. We have to deliver in those three methodologies because not everyone in Victoria has access to an online — —

The CHAIR — Broadband.

Ms STUBBS — We do provide students, those who cannot afford them, with a computer so they can have a computer, but there are issues in rural and regional Victoria about broadband, and particularly bandwidth. There are still people with online dial-up. It is very costly to be in an online situation in that circumstance, but it also tends to be fairly flakey.

You take, say, Maryborough. As soon as you are 5 kilometres outside of Maryborough you have got no dial-up access. So our provision is tending to move more towards CD rather than print, because then you add all of the interactive elements, all of those sorts of things. But anything about real synchronous provision — that is the real-time ‘I am here’ when other students are in — tends to be broadband-width hungry and therefore there are a range of issues to do with that. So we tend to work predominantly in the synchronous environment, so that if we do have a session where students come together, we are using technology to record the session — either pod cast or in video form, and then that will become available to students on CD or in the online environment.

In regard to costs, we are a government school and therefore there are no fees. The only costs to parents are not uniform or anything like that: they are the mailing costs, which are \$150 for the full enrolment. If you are overseas, clearly the costs are greater, in terms of mail and all that sort of thing.

DECV parents have access to youth allowance and all of those other things. The only thing they do not have access to is the impairment funding. If they got that in a school for learning difficulties or whatever, that is not transferable to DECV.

In terms of the benefits, we enable access. Students without DECV would not have access to the range of subjects, or in many cases access to schooling. Many of our students are housebound — if they are medical, either for social and emotional reasons or for the fact that medically they cannot do it. Then there is the distance component. Also being asynchronous means that we can fit in with any timetable. Let us say two schools were trying to share a subject. Their timetables across the board would have to mesh in, and that becomes problematic over time. The asynchronous enables you to do it anywhere at any time.

The evidence on a worldwide basis on data is that the achievement statistics do not distinguish between normal schools and a distance environment; the success rates are very comparable. In my four years at DECV we have had at least one Premier’s VCE award every year, so we have high achievers.

The CHAIR — Would they be from school attendees or non-attendees?

Ms STUBBS — No, they are DECV students, doing our subjects.

The CHAIR — Entirely yours?

Ms STUBBS — Yes, the one in philosophy last year was entirely ours. Where they are in a base school we tend not to get the recognition. There are a whole range of reasons there. We had four students in the VCE season of excellence top dance and we had six students in top sounds, so students can achieve in a distance environment just as well.

The challenges for students are about the need for self discipline because you do not have a teacher there at that time giving you that immediacy of response. I have actually got issues with that on an educational basis because it does not encourage higher order thinking if a teacher is able to provide an answer just like that, when do you actually sit and work through the problems. But our follow-up with students is not in real time, it tends to be in hindsight so the need for self discipline is there, the need for organisational skills to work out your own timetable. While you get advice from our teachers, you actually have to do it yourself and actually work out how things work in with your lifestyle and everything that you do. There is also the need for independent learning skills.

The unsolicited feedback from students is that the materials that we provide them either online or on paper et cetera, successfully meets the requirements for them to succeed, and also we get a lot of feedback to say that the way in which we prepare them actually prepares them for success when they go on beyond VCE.

The CHAIR — Are your materials produced by your teachers?

Ms STUBBS — Our teachers write them.

The CHAIR — Do you have outside assistance?

Ms STUBBS — No, but occasionally we will commission somebody to do some writing, like our physical education course in year 12 last year was written, by somebody external working with teachers in the school, and that was because we only had one person who was trained in PhysEd at that time and they had not taught VCE in Victoria. We have since employed another PhysEd teacher who is Victorian based and so now any further development will be done by DECV.

For international studies — it was written in 2006 — we did not have a teacher that was current in the teaching of that, we had a teacher who would teach it in 2007. The teacher who taught it in 2007 worked with the teacher who had taught it previously in the writing so it is predominantly written by that other person who had the expertise. That was then about up skilling the teacher we had, so that they actually understood the course and were prepared for it before they taught it in the following year, but that would be the exception rather than the rule.

That is about the picture of DECV. I can give you all of the outcomes for our students in terms of national benchmarks and all of that sort of thing if that is of interest but that is available in our annual report to the community.

In terms of the number of students going into higher education, our 2006-2007 data shows that there is an increase in students going into both full-time and part-time work, that there is a large increase in students not going into anything, but in terms of data I cannot track that back to whether they are medical enrolments or what enrolment category they are. There are problems with us being able to track all of that data back.

There is a decrease in apprenticeship and there is also a large increase in the no-response category. Again, our data is about DECV students only because the data about school-based students tends to be held by the school in terms of that tracking data, so it is very hard to find out any impacts there.

Mr DIXON — Where are you located now?

Ms STUBBS — We are in Thornbury.

Mr DIXON — Have you always been there?

Ms STUBBS — No, there has been a transition.

Mr DIXON — You were in South Melbourne, weren't you?

Ms STUBBS — Yes, and prior to that in Elizabeth Street, and prior to that in Fitzroy, and then prior to that somewhere else.

Mr DIXON — Are you out of a school, or out of an office building?

Ms STUBBS — We are in the old Northcote tech site.

Mr DIXON — In a perfect world, what are the best conditions for a child to learn by distance education?

Ms STUBBS — To have online access because then that allows them the capacity to collaborate with other students. If they do not have a bandwidth that enables them to get into our online learning management system then they actually cannot participate in a lot of those other broadening aspects. It is a very static word document that they have access to. If they have got the CD then they will get access to interactives but then discussing work is problematic for them. They are then left in isolation.

We have got a course in year 7 that is totally online, it uses blogs and wikis to enable students to put work up and what the format of that course is that students actually put their work up for other students, not for the teacher, so it is quite a different format to what you would use in the classroom. What we are actually finding is that the level of high-order thinking has just skyrocketed because students are actually putting it out there to their peers.

The evidence that I have, and we have now got a year 11 course totally online that we will have data about at the end of the year. Year 12 will never be able to be totally online because of issues about authenticity and a whole range of things about SATs and all those sorts of things at year 12, but all of our evidence is that the online requirement with today's students promotes high-order thinking and gives them a very high-order response.

If you think about the classroom the dominant paradigm is to ask a question, the most articulate fast thinker gets to put their hand up, not necessarily the best thinking, but they put them up. There are a lot of students who would like to take time in their thinking who are not enabled in those classroom circumstances, and the online environment actually allows them time.

If I were to go back to a mainstream school now — I have been in distance ed for four years and I was in Broadmeadows prior to that — I would get rid of a classroom timetable and I would make sure that at least 50 per cent of a child's education was actually done in an online way so that they actually had the opportunity to think about things before they actually put it up and that they actually could have interaction with other students about the work, not about the personality. So much of the classroom is about what is cool to say and what is not cool to say, and all of those judgements that come forward.

I would allow students to present work under an avatar as opposed to a name. If I could give you a recent example, we have a student who has just come online with us. The school tells us that they have doubts about whether the student can actually undertake the work. When you talk to the student they are highly articulate, have independent learning skills and initiative.

The student enrolled last Friday and as of Monday wanted to know who all the teachers were, wanted to contact them, had read the first week of work which required them to actually contact the teacher to amend the workload because they are coming on late. The student had actually presented work for one teacher which was of very high standard, certainly B-plus or A. This was over a weekend enrolment and the school has doubts about them. When you see a photo of the child, the child has — —

The CHAIR — You might make inappropriate judgements.

Ms STUBBS — Yes. Anyway that has probably not got a lot to do with this but it does impact on them.

Mr DIXON — A good illustration, thank you.

The CHAIR — So how many teachers do you have and does your staffing work on a staff: teacher ratio basis?

Ms STUBBS — It does. If you are a year 12 teacher you have 56 students, and it is the workload that students send in that affects the ratio. We interpret the EBA for schools for our environment so a teacher at year 12 has 56; a teacher at year 11 has 70; a teacher at years 7–10 has 80; at P–2 they have 25; and at years 3–6 they have 23. At the lower levels they are actually not producing a lot of the work, and for a lot of the work the teacher works with the supervisor, the parent of the child. It reflects that. That is about 0.2 of what you would have if you were a teacher in a normal school because 0.2 of a teacher's load at distance ed is about writing materials, if that makes sense.

The CHAIR — Do you link any of your students who might live remotely, or even I suppose in metro, into a learning centre where they might be able to go to do some direct videoconferencing or anything like that?

Ms STUBBS — Videoconferencing is bandwidth-hungry and there are very, very few places in Victoria where you have the bandwidth to run a videoconference. So it is not something we even think about.

The CHAIR — It is pretty much out of the question?

Ms STUBBS — And because of the nature of many of our students actually requiring them to go to a spot for a real-time event is problematic for people. Teachers actually go out to the country; we pay for the teachers to

go and travel around the countryside to meet with students and work with them in small groups or whatever, as required. We do have seminars that are held in Melbourne; because of the nature of our transport, coming into Melbourne tends to be a better methodology than, say, holding them in Bendigo or Ballarat or anything like that because the issues of getting from, say, Portland to Ballarat are just as bad. You might as well come to Melbourne.

The CHAIR — Would your teachers make direct phone contact with students?

Ms STUBBS — Yes. We expect teachers, at a minimum, to have contact — even if the child is going on very nicely and not indicating that there are any problems — with the student every two weeks, and also to include the parent in that every two weeks.

The CHAIR — Would we say that distance education would help to contribute to a higher level of completion to year 12?

Ms STUBBS — I would say that that would be a fair statement. Yes.

Mr DIXON — What I was leading to from my earlier question about bandwidth and the importance of that, and being online and online learning, what about in terms of people? How important is a supportive family? When it is a school-centred subject, how important is the support of the school student?

Ms STUBBS — My perfect model would be that there is an effective mentor of the organisational skills — all of those other sort of things — not necessarily about the technical elements of the subject but about those developmental areas for students because they are not adults. They do not have the adult skills and so they really need support in organising themselves, maintaining currency, maintaining priorities and being able to prioritise. They tend to be skills that in mainstream schools we do not work on because the environment is very much a controlled environment about what you do when.

There is not a lot of decision-making by students at that point. In terms of students moving on into tertiary education, when they get into a university environment or TAFE environment or whatever, it is very much up to the student. They have to have those self-discipline skills to attend appropriate sessions. They need to have the organisational skills to make sure that whatever they have to do gets done, and they need to be able to learn independently without somebody being over your shoulder saying, ‘Why have you not done this?’.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much, Bronwyn. That looks as if it is all we need to know at this stage.

Ms STUBBS — There were some things I wanted to add. Just in terms of why students are not perhaps going on, I am part of an organisation called AADES, which is the Australasian Association of Distance Education Schools; so if I were to provide some feedback, it probably should be to the federal government. Nearly every other state has satellite broadband. Victoria, because it is not distant enough and not rural enough, actually does not have those financial supports for people in rural areas. Gippsland is particularly flaky. It is sort of up and down like that and so there are a whole range of issues for them there.

In terms of students participating in higher education, it is increasingly becoming Melbourne-centric, which means students in rural and regional Victoria have to move and there are a whole range of costs there. The anecdotal evidence to us — and it would fit in with the data that there is an increase in part-time and full-time work — is that they have a gap between completing their VCE and taking up any placement because that enables them to get financial supports about living away from home. They cannot go straight from school to higher education.

I would say in terms of being able to participate in the online environment, I know we are not publicised out in mainstream schools. There are a lot of students out there who would not know distance ed exists and so therefore I would say that there are also issues about students knowing about the Open Universities and the online environment there.

The CHAIR — But would your students be advised of those opportunities of pursuing higher education via Open Universities or other distance education-type courses?

Ms STUBBS — I would suggest it would not be strongly promoted because there would be a view in the educational community that online is not the best, that face-to-face is the best. Not to be critical of teachers but there is a significant proportion of teachers who are not as familiar with the online environment as students are, and

do not have perhaps an understanding of student competence in that sort of area and the way in which students work very differently from us.

Again, if I could give you an anecdote: one of our students who participated in this year 7 online philosophy for 12 months had never met another girl. At our awards day they met and it was as though they had known each other for 15 years. They knew more about each other as people but they did not know who they were physically. You would not find many adults who would see that the online environment enabled students to make effective relationships. So I think there is a paradigm disparity between older individuals and younger people.

The CHAIR — I was just thinking a number of your students who obviously have not been able to undertake schooling physically for one reason or another might find that the opportunity to go on to online-type university might suit their particular situation.

Ms STUBBS — My explanation perhaps was more about that they probably would not be counselled in that direction because of the issues about who is doing the advising and how they perceive things.

The CHAIR — I understand. Thank you, Bronwyn.

Witness withdrew.

CORRECTED VERSION

EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE (SUB-COMMITTEE)

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

Melbourne — 23 July 2008

Members of the Sub-Committee

Mr M. Dixon	Mr G. Howard
Mr N. Elasmarr	Mr N. Kotsiras
Mr P. Hall	

Chair: Mr G. Howard

Deputy Chair: Mr N. Kotsiras

Staff

Executive Officer: Ms K. Ellingford

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

Committee Administrative Officer: Ms N. Tyler

Witnesses

Mr S. Robson, acting executive officer, and

Mr E. Micallef, deputy chairperson, Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria.

The CHAIR — Welcome, Shaun — and welcome back, Eddie! It is good to have representation from the Ethnic Communities Council at the inquiries that we are holding into participation in higher education and variations that might happen on a geographical basis for a range of reasons. Ethnicity clearly has some issues that we should made aware of. We are looking forward to the contribution you can make and also to being able to ask some questions of you after you have perhaps put some of the initial circumstances you think are relevant to us.

Mr MICALLEF — I am currently deputy chair of the Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria. In our submission you will see a bit of the background of the organisation. It was a voluntary community organisation established in 1974, so it has been around for quite a while. We have obviously seen some changes in the make-up of the community in relation to people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

I came from one of the early migrants — my parents were Maltese and my father migrated to this country back in 1928. As both my parents were born overseas from non-English-speaking backgrounds, so I had that first-hand experience of growing up in those days. The ECCV was set up to represent the aspirations of that group of people who had migrated and helped to build this country to what it is today. We, from that culturally diverse background, are very proud of our contribution, and the ECCV promotes the contribution that people have made from outside of the mainstream.

When you look at employment and training, and I also have some experiences in this area. Before going into Parliament I had some background in training apprenticeships in the engineering industry. I was on the Engineering Skills Foundation with people like John Halfpenny and Bob Herbert back when they did a lot of the overhaul of the technical training staff.

Also I was a member of Parliament during the abolition of the technical schools. In retrospect I do not think that was a very good move. Both state and federal governments have moved to redress some of the issues, because I think it cut off access to students, especially from lower economic and non-English-speaking backgrounds, accessing education and developing and going through to a higher level. Those barriers are there. If you have a look at certain groups within the community — and I do not have the current figures — and you look at the old Arabic-speaking, Turkish-speaking, Vietnamese-speaking youth unemployment rates in those groups during, when I was heavily involved, the 70s and the 80s, it was extremely high, well above the mainstream average. There have always been barriers, even where there is not a geographical problem that you are looking at.

When they had the capacity to be able to enter into education or institutions and do higher education, they were not accessing education in greater numbers. The major exceptions of course were the well-organised ethno-specific communities like Greeks, Jewish and Italian. I think Greeks were the highest represented non-English-speaking group at Monash back in the 80s, from memory — I remember those days. They obviously saw the benefit and they did a lot to redress it, but other ethnic groups did not have the capacity to organise to that effect, and therefore they missed out, and that has been quite a bad thing.

The ECCV is rural based also. It has organisations in Ballarat, Bendigo, Shepparton, Mildura and Gippsland. We have feedback from those rural representatives. We had an executive meeting last night. They present reports. In late May we had a regional conference in Shepparton which was supported by five rural councils, which dealt with — not in depth — issues regarding access to employment and so on. It was very real.

We are very conscious of those issues but we are limited on the basis of being funded \$400 000 to \$500 000 a year, and with a small core of staff there is a limit to what we can do. With that small base I think we do make a big difference. Going through our submission, we are looking at calling for things like targeted research. I think the research would only back up the observations that we make but it is nice to have a validation of the views and experiences that we have, to, I suppose, give stronger voice to the needs of the community for government to respond to. I think that is important.

An area that we are spending a lot of time on, which I think the ECCV has been a little bit tardy in responding to, is the needs of the emerging communities. The latest groups from Africa, Burma and places like that, wherever the trouble spots are, take a while to get connected, to get organised, and within their own communities have lots of difficulties in getting a united voice, because a lot of them come from different tribal arrangements, different political arrangements and different cultural arrangements within their own countries.

You can also understand, from the emerging communities aspect, in terms of literacy and numeracy, where some of the countries have been in civil war, obviously they have not been sitting down in the classroom learning to be

literate and numerate in their own language, let alone then trying to become literate and numerate in a second language. That creates quite a barrier.

I think the outstanding success in a country area of course has been the Iraqi situation in Shepparton. That was developed out of a need, because they just could not get labour. A normally socially conservative region has embraced Iraqi refugees, who have become very much ensconced in the culture of the town. So these barriers can be overcome but there has to be a will in the community. There has to be support from governments to fund community organisations to help that sort of realisation come to fruition.

When we talk about mainstream organisations — I was at a forum in the city of Melbourne only about two years ago at which the consultant, with an Italian name, who spoke with a slight Italian accent, talked about the fact that in the City of Melbourne's catchment area, 48 per cent were from English-speaking backgrounds. I said, 'Why don't you put it in its proper context and say that 52 per cent of the people in the city of Melbourne are from non-English-speaking backgrounds, and they are the mainstream, and therefore in responding to the English-speaking groups you are not responding to the mainstream?'. And the cities of Maribyrnong and Greater Dandenong have a similar situation.

I heard the previous speaker talk about the underutilisation of apprenticeships and traineeships. I also sit on the William Angliss TAFE council and I know those figures. Not one TAFE in the country, either rural and regional or city and metropolitan, is coming up to its quota of apprenticeships and trainees, so we are missing out badly right across the board. These are things that you have to deal with as a committee.

I can just single out one program in Cranbourne that William Angliss is running — the single parents program — which is looking at both males and females and trying to get them into hospitality-type programs to give them an avenue into further education.

I know it is not higher education but I just think we are so crying out in this country for skilled people at a whole range of levels, and once you get into the workforce in a semi-skilled capacity, you can work your way up through the system and do really well.

The ECCV also has established an employment and training committee, and we are attempting to deal with this. One of the members of that committee is who is a former upper house member of Parliament, Licia Kokocinski, who chairs it; she would have spent many hours in this room.

In terms of skilled migration I did some of the regional consultations for the ECCV for the skilled migration program, and one of the things I raised in consulting with the rural areas is the fact that bringing skilled migrants into this country does have the potential to create — you, coming from Ballarat, would understand, Chair! — resentment from locals over the fact that they are taking jobs away from the locals. It has to be, I suppose, expressed to the community that it is a way of increasing employment and training opportunities by developing industries within those regional areas that will open up opportunities for younger people to come in and be trained.

The same applies to the 457 visas. I understand governments need to bring in skilled workers at a whole range of levels, wherever there are skill shortages, but that is only a short-term thing. I support that system but I think it should be met with increasing resources by governments and the community to alleviate those skill shortages.

With my historical background, looking at some of the ethno-specific groups that were involved with the SEEP commonwealth employment program back in the 80s and the EIPs (employment initiatives programs), they were extremely good in bringing young people in. Maybe they were not the most efficient use of funds. I am not suggesting we go back to that but I think there needs to be some types of programs. If you have a look at the VCAL programs in Victoria, I think they are leading the country, and I think that is the way to bring a lot of people in.

We run William Angliss in consultation with St Kilda Youth Services and the Buckland philanthropic group. The City of Port Phillip runs a hospitality training-type program called HEAT that has trained a number of young people through the VCAL program. Two of them have gone on to be top-class chefs, and they then have the ability to tap into higher education.

With transport, you only have to look at Cranbourne and Berwick — I have had a lot of experience out in those areas. If you lived in Berwick and wanted to go to one of the southern health facilities at Cranbourne, you had to

catch a train to Caulfield and back out again. So transport, even in semi-metropolitan areas, is difficult, and I do not have to spell out what the difficulty is in rural areas.

I will not go on any more. I will just say, in terms of what you can do as a committee, having had experience on committees before; I think your recommendations to government are extremely important.

I think ethno-specific groups need to be funded to be able to promote an awareness and understanding within their specific communities about the opportunities to act as linkages, because of this unmet demand within the TAFE system and within the universities. I push at the lower end, the technical voice. I am one voice on the William Angliss board. We are now issuing degrees.

There are plenty of people who support the upper end, but I think champions are needed for those at the lower end, with a view to bringing a lot more in and to filter some of them up through to the academic degree status at the other end of their career. We need to do that. If Ireland can do it, I am sure Australia can. They have picked themselves up by the bootstraps and they have become techno-savvy. They have built themselves an extremely high reputation.

I think there needs to be community organisations, schools, universities and areas funded to be able to develop those linkages — the VET programs, those type of things. There is a nucleus of those programs there. That needs to be expanded for young people and not only young people — students do not necessarily always have to be young. The other area we are missing out on is the over 35s. The TAFE area was given a charter by the government to look at under 25s and over 45s. They could not meet the targets for those aged over 45, so the department's recommendation was to lower the 45 to 35 so they could meet their quotas.

Without being critical of that approach, we should not have to go to that extent to meet quotas. We should set quotas and fill up the vacancies, because we have a country that is crying out for skilled and trained people. We have an unmet demand. We have a lot of people with overseas qualifications that are not properly recognised or not properly utilised. We have a reservoir of skills out there that need to be harnessed. You as a committee, I believe, have a responsibility to make some recommendations that will achieve some outcomes in relation to those groups.

The CHAIR — I do not know whether you had anything to add at this stage, Shaun, or whether we just go straight on with questions?

Mr ROBSON — I think Eddie has touched on most of the major issues. I was interested to see that the choice of term was 'geographic differences'. Obviously the ECCV does not necessarily think difference is a bad thing, as long as it does not disadvantage some communities.

What Eddie touched on earlier was that there are obviously certain LGAs within the state of Victoria where the density of population for communities other than English-speaking or from refugee backgrounds is higher. Any disadvantage that might be felt in terms of number of places in higher education or the variety of institutions within a local area is exacerbated among the multicultural communities, primarily for other reasons such as language. You would have seen the article in the newspaper today about international students. The same issues arise with the students who are here as refugees.

There are the cultural differences, obviously. Eddie also touched on the issues of transport. We still have issues getting from A to B. If it is a newly arrived refugee, they have enough trouble negotiating their own LGA let alone going across town, if they have to go to a school over there.

There is the issue of housing, if you need to relocate. Again, the disadvantages are immense for everyone right now, but they are magnified for newly arrived communities. If they want to try and get rental accommodation next to a university in town, they do not have the background referees. They cannot have the financial background to slot in, so it is a disadvantage for them.

There is also the issue of child care. I am not sure Eddie mentioned it. He mentioned that not all students are young, but we do have a certain cohort of students, particularly refugee women that come to the country, who are very interested in furthering their skills and education, but obviously a lot of them are the primary caregivers in their households. While the man of the house, as it were, is out there making money, they have to sort out the family. Having a child-care arrangement in place while they study is problematic, particularly a child-care service that is culturally appropriate.

It is also worth mentioning — and I guess Eddie touched on this earlier — that there is a bit of a concentration geographically for certain communities. We are well aware that the Jewish community is in certain parts, Arabic communities are in certain parts. They are established communities, but it means that if a newly arrived member of that population wants to attend those schools, that is going to be a geographic hurdle for them to get from A to B. If you want to attend the top-quality Jewish school but you are living out in the sticks, there is an issue.

There was mention before we started about the online environment. That is one possible answer to some of the issues of geography. I would add though — and this touches on Eddie's earlier point — that a lot of our newly arrived communities are not proficient in English, let alone computer savvy. It would not necessarily be the answer to all the problems. There would need to be a serious training, easing-in process. Very few are familiar with the Western education environment at all.

As Eddie mentioned, some have been transitioned in refugee camps. Putting them into classrooms is a big step as it is, let alone getting them to adjust to doing everything online; that is probably another step again. I am not saying it is not worth pursuing, but we have to be realistic about expectations in the short term. I think that is about all I can think of at the moment that is worth considering.

The CHAIR — Are there any particular TAFEs or universities that you are aware of that have recognised that there are particular ethnic groups or cultural groups that they should be doing something for and have put in place good courses that might meet those particular needs?

Mr MICALLEF — I think VET is one example. They have a very close relationship with my community, and they often have visiting dignitaries from Malta and have special arrangements and seminars and forums. Obviously there was a large Maltese community out in the Western suburbs. That is one that comes to mind. Not that I am saying indigenous people are not CALD — but the facility at Preston, the old school at Preston, my old stamping ground — I grew up at Preston-Reservoir — has been developed to cater for indigenous people.

I think Latrobe Valley had a lot to do with the various waves of migrants. I think wherever there are pockets of migrants, colleges develop programs. Look at Clayton with the Cambodians and Springvale with the Vietnamese.

Mr ROBSON — I know that the tertiary level at Monash right now is quite active in developing programs for the African communities. They have a campus, as you may be aware, in South Africa, so they do have linkages internationally, and they are quite eager — I guess they feel some sense of responsibility in that respect — to assist in the nurturing of young African refugees here, so they are developing programs that help in the educational transitional stages here. That is one I am aware of.

Mr MICALLEF — I take it you have had AMES before this committee? No? They are running some wonderful programs for African people at the facility out at Brunswick. I suggest you contact the director. I forget his name; I have got his card in my wallet somewhere.

The CHAIR — Okay, we can follow that up.

Mr MICALLEF — They are doing some great work. They promote employment opportunities amongst that community, and they have got some cottage industries running and are trying to establish those refugee communities.

Mr DIXON — Would it be a general rule that the more established ethnic communities have got a higher proportion going into higher education?

Mr MICALLEF — Yes. I think that is a given. As I said, Greek, Jewish and Italian are the three.

I took part in some discussions many years ago with the Maltese hierarchy, and I think there was not the same sort of ambition because a lot of Maltese come from trade backgrounds. They went down to Latrobe Valley and worked in that area. The aspirations of that community were not very high. I think that is changing now but for many years they were quite prepared to contribute at that level. But I think the Greeks and Italians and Israelis saw their children as future lawyers — there are good Greek lawyers and plenty of Jewish doctors.

Mr ROBSON — It is also worth mentioning, bouncing off that point, that there is a bit of a generational change going on that is particularly common in the African community, which I have had quite intense dealings with. There is an expectation, as Eddie has said, that when the parents arrive the kids might just get into the first job

they can, whereas the kids actually do have aspirations to get into the professions, so the kids will be aiming for the university degree while the parents will be pushing them towards the trades.

It is a generational conflict — ‘conflict’ is a hard word, but it does exist. It does involve, if you are going to have career advisers addressing these communities, some understanding of those inner family issues. The kids just cannot go home and say, ‘I have been told I should go to university’, because it does cause a bit of disharmony at home.

Mr MICALLEF — During the 1980s and 1990s I was on the board of the Noble Park English Language School when the Bosnians and people from that region came into Australia, and watching the young children there sort of develop virtually overnight, it can be an amazing transition. They were given a wonderful boost, and a lot of those refugees were not entitled to many of the health support and other issues, and I remember they used to be snuck into the school numbers in a sort of slightly underhand way, but I think it was socially responsible; it may not have been technically proper, but I think it achieved the desired results.

If you go out to Noble Park these days, you will see Sudanese everywhere, and that was the problem of a month back with the death of the young Sudanese. I think if you have young people who are not actively occupied in employment or training or some support systems, it creates a lot of problems for the community. To me it always pays to put money into developing people and prevention — classic prevention — rather than sort of picking up people, because what does it cost to put somebody in a juvenile institution — around about \$80 000 or \$90 000. I do a lot of work in the drug and alcohol area, so I fully understand those things.

The CHAIR — I think you have covered pretty much the areas that we had hoped and opened up those questions that are relevant that we need to follow up.

Mr MICALLEF — All I can say is if you need a view on other organisations’ responses — from our perspective — just forward it on to us and we will happily accommodate you. Good luck with your deliberations, and we look forward to supporting your recommendations.

Committee adjourned.