

CORRECTED VERSION

EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

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

Melbourne — 23 March 2009

Members

Mr M. Dixon
Mr N. Elasmar
Mr P. Hall
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Witnesses

Ms R. Moore, university student, RMIT University; and
Ms B. McKenzie, graduate, Gippsland community leadership program.

The CHAIR — I declare this hearing of the Education and Training Committee open. We are hearing evidence today in regard to our inquiry into geographical differences in the rate in which Victorian students participate in higher education. I wish to advise that evidence given today to the committee is subject to parliamentary privilege, which effectively means you are free to be quite open and frank with us in regard to your contribution. I see that Gippsland is online. We will commence the videoconference.

Ms McKENZIE — I just wanted to thank the committee for addressing this issue that is so fundamental to the social and economic development of regional communities by conducting this inquiry. My role in the submission today has been to facilitate Rachael's involvement. I participated in the Gippsland community leadership program in 2008, and we had to do a project around something we were particularly passionate about in our local region. As an educator, a teacher and now a lecturer at Monash University I have always been passionate about ensuring country kids get to university, and hopefully come home with those professional qualifications. That is my involvement; Rachael will be the one telling our story today.

The CHAIR — Rachael, whenever you want to share with us your issues of concern and your experience, go ahead and then we will have some questions to follow up with.

Ms MOORE — Thank you very much, and thank you, Bridget. As you know, Bridget and I are from a small country town called Yarram in South Gippsland. Gippsland itself is a predominantly farming community, and Yarram is no different. Yarram is a 4000 people-strong district supporting a town of 2500 people; 500 of those 2500 people are 15 to 24-year-olds. Yarram is situated about 80 kilometres away from Sale, which is its nearest large town with roughly 14 000 people, and is roughly 220 kilometres away from Melbourne, being connected only by one V/Line bus service a day. Yarram supports two primary schools and one high school. According to On Track data, only 43 students finished year 12 last year at Yarram, with only 32 per cent of those 43 students applying for higher education.

With regard to the methodology, Bridget and I decided that the qualitative option 2 was going to allow us to tell our story the best, so this is what we went with. We focused on my friendship group from school as a case study just because we believed it was pretty generalisable to the community itself and acted as a representation of the entire community and pretty much any general, small farming community town within the state.

I think you know I am a psychology major at RMIT University. I relocated to Melbourne last February, leaving my family in Yarram. I am the only one out of my friendship group to be at university today. One of my best girlfriends left school shortly after I left Yarram Secondary College. I relocated to Sale, to the private school. After spending three years at Yarram Secondary College I felt that in order to reach my goals and my aspiration of attending uni I needed to be elsewhere and so left. After that, one of my closest friends dropped out of school and is now living in Melbourne. She has been a live-in nanny for just over a year now, after completing a TAFE course in child care. Another one of my friends is now living with her boyfriend, with whom she has one child. She finished year 12; however, she did not do exams. Another girl went to Queensland after dropping out of school. However, she moved back to Yarram not all that long ago and is now working in the supermarket. The final girl moved to Melbourne with her boyfriend for his football career. However, they are both moving back to Yarram within the next month.

Through interviewing these girls and my own experience, as well as Bridget's through teaching, we have identified four key themes in regard to rural high schools and attendance at university. The first one is the aspirations and factors affecting higher education participation in rural towns, both for students and their families. The second is the gender differences with regard to participation. The third is the obvious financial barriers, and the fourth is the rural schools themselves and the role they play in either putting up barriers or taking them down in the ability of students to attend higher education.

The first issue we are going to raise is this idea of the aspirations of the students and their families. The mentality of many families in Yarram, and I am sure many other small farming communities, both at the student and parental level, is that the farm often outweighs the importance of being at school. Many students are often away from classes, often for weeks at a time, in order to help out on the farm. Many families see this as more beneficial than the education itself. For many families the farm is their way of life and it is their only income. It is their financial security, and many students see it as their future regardless of what level of education they complete; thus the onus is often placed on the students themselves to help out when required. Many would seem to rather miss a day of school than see the farm or the family suffer. This knowledge that the farm is sometimes

their future cemented often means that students do not see the importance of attending school and there is often a large dropout before year 10, especially from the males, who are often, I guess, the breadwinners within a farming family.

Also, due to the close-knit, family-oriented nature of Yarram, and I am sure it is the same in many other farming communities, students from country towns face the added stress of leaving behind their social networks and their families when they relocate for university. Many students see leaving the close-knit community of Yarram as too stressful, and have limited exposure to the city anyway, thus leaving to live independently can be a huge shock to the system. I understand that starting university is pretty stressful in itself without the added stress of not having my family around to support me and my social network and everything I had grown to rely on living in such a small country town. Social networks prove extremely important in small country towns, just to the survival of the town itself. They play an important role in decision making amongst students.

The second thing we would like to bring up is the gender differences between males and females and whether they attend university. One of the major points we got from this was that there is an obvious lack of skills — skill shortages — due to students leaving high school to gain apprenticeships, especially with the males in the community. There is a high rate of student dropout in order to obtain an apprenticeship, but in reality there are too many males leaving school and not enough apprenticeships available in such a small town, which often leads to relocation for many of the young boys, thus seeing their skills taken away from the small town and obviously not enough higher education is being undertaken by them. We want to make it pretty clear that there is nothing wrong with undertaking a trade rather than higher education, but we see it as extremely important that people do finish high school at least so they have the education there as a backup, especially in these uncertain economic times.

The second one with males especially is role modelling. It is a large issue within our community itself, being a typical football and sporting-oriented community. There seems to be a lack of appropriate role models within the community. There are not enough males attending university or tertiary education, and there seems to be an obvious attraction to the local older boys who — just from experience, having two younger brothers — seem to look up to the local tradies who have done their apprenticeships and are now working for either a building contractor or a plumbing company and who basically go to work five days a week and then come home and play football on the weekends and then go to the pub.

We have begun to realise that there are not enough males in the community who are showing that going to university and continuing with your education really does benefit you just because it seems more attractive to them basically to have a full-time job, to be able to play sport on the weekends and have fun with their mates. It is proving highly detrimental to young men who, at school, would have seemed most likely to attend university, but they see their friends and their friends' older brothers drop out and do perfectly fine without higher education, and the lifestyle depicted by these young men I guess appears more appealing to the younger generation of school leavers, often deterring them from tertiary education altogether, which we see as being pretty sad, given the benefits of tertiary education.

It also seems that many young women in the town would rather stay with their boyfriends or partners rather than attend university, and deferring seems to be a large issue with regard to the young women. It seems that if they are currently in a long-term relationship, they would rather stay in Yarram until the relationship ends or the boyfriend decides that he will relocate with her, which is often not the case due to most men undertaking apprenticeships, which are three to four years long, so the women end up pretty much deferring and putting off their study. Also anecdotally it seems that a lot of students are deferring and not returning to study due to the benefits of full-time employment rather than, I guess, struggling as a student, which I have found.

The third issue is the obvious financial barriers in place for rural students. As I said, a large proportion of students are from farming backgrounds. Eighty per cent of Yarram high school students are bus travellers, which indicates that a large proportion are not living in the town itself so are obviously either on a farm or on the land.

The CHAIR — Before the break in connection, you were talking about financial issues.

Ms MOORE — Which I am sure you have heard plenty of. Obviously tertiary education is pretty difficult due to the need for many students to relocate. I myself found it pretty hard. I was living on couches for a fair

while, and there are living expenses, books and everything like that. Some research has indicated that it costs roughly \$10 000 to \$20 000 for a student to relocate for their entire degree, and that is just living expenses alone, excluding the actual degree itself. I was lucky in that I won a scholarship to RMIT based on both my grades and my rural setting, so my degree is fully funded. However, some students do not have that luxury, I guess, and tertiary education just is not feasible based on their family's earnings and their earnings as students.

Finally, we would like to bring up some points with regard to rural schools themselves and the role we believe they play in both placing barriers and to some degree taking them down for students wishing to attend tertiary education. One major issue regarding rural schools is the class sizes. They are often too large due to a lack of both specialised teachers and just space in general. It can lead to disruptive behaviour, often getting out of control, and proves extremely detrimental to students who wish to be there to learn. Just from prior experience I know that it is very hard to study in a class where half the people there do not actually want to be there and are just happy basically mucking around and making it difficult for both teachers and the students who really wish to be there.

Also a lack of availability is pretty evident. Specialised classes are often not available in rural schools, such as LOTE, English literature, English language and classes like these. It means students who are wishing to undertake these classes need to either do so by distance ed, which can be extremely stressful — I tried it once, and that was a large driving force behind my relocating to Sale for my final years of VCE — or by relocating, but for some students even relocating is just not an option. Especially with the family's role in education in rural settings, if the family does not believe that a relocation is necessary and they do not support the student in their desire for a broader education, then there is really nothing that can be done.

The travel itself is an issue. I commuted every day for an hour both ways to Sale for my VCE years, which on top of VCE was extremely stressful; it was tiring. For my exams I ended up being flooded out of Yarram and was stuck in a hotel for my entire exam period with no books or anything. The travel itself is pretty detrimental. I just know that I was under a lot of stress, and I know that a lot of other kids are. I was only one of two at the start of my high school education travelling to Sale on this little bus. It has now grown since the new bus service has been introduced; however, it is still quite tiring and often not an option for some students.

I guess leaving in itself raises strain. Attending the schools requires substantial life changes and costs. A bus that travels to Sale is provided; however, it is an extremely high cost. It is run by the private schools in conjunction with the public school in Sale. However, it is quite expensive, so even if sending your child to the public school in Sale was going to work out for you, it is still quite expensive to actually have to put them on the bus every day. It can be upwards of \$4000 a semester. I know my parents found it pretty hard just to come up with that four grand just to get me to school every day. I think they were pretty thankful when I finally got my licence and I could drive myself.

Also, finally, students who do try seem to meet a lot of obstacles as well, thus deterring them from pursuing tertiary education. The financial issues are still relevant at this level; however, other issues are evident to those who are motivated to do well at secondary school in order to gain tertiary offers. One of the main things is a lack of support from teachers as well as a lack of availability of the classes, as I said before. I found that it was very hard to gain support from teachers who really had to monitor the students who were disruptive in classes and would take up the teachers' time. I found it really hard to get the support I needed for my studies, and I think they assumed that I was bright enough to handle it myself, when I think everyone needs the right amount of support and an equal amount of support regardless of whether or not they are exceptionally bright or they are bored at school or anything. I just think that support is imperative in making sure that secondary education provides a perfect stepping stone to tertiary education.

In regard to results, Yarram in particular was fairly low. The average ENTER last year was only 65. Sale College, the public school in Sale, was much the same, whilst at Gippsland Grammar there was a higher average, with 48 per cent of their 2008 class being in the top 20th percentile in the state. But when compared to private schools in Melbourne, the results are extremely low. I highlighted the gender differences between males and females. I guess for the males from Yarram who typically leave before year 12 and gain an apprenticeship, the doors are not really that open for them. However, males at private schools in Melbourne are performing better than those at almost all co-ed schools within the state — for example, last year the average ENTER from Xavier College was 89.35. This huge difference, especially in male performance, highlights the extreme differences in and possibilities open for students in city areas in comparison to those for students from rural

areas. It especially highlights the complete differences in the opportunities open for students from, say, Xavier College or St Kevin's College, to those for students who are graduating from Yarram. With the exception of a couple in the odd year, it is pretty low in comparison.

From our data we reached a few conclusions. We believe it is pretty imperative to provide easier accessibility to uni and more flexible ways of learning, such as videoconferencing like this. We believe it would be perfect if students were able to travel to, say, Sale or Traralgon to a campus that would allow them to learn through videoconferencing. We just believe if a uni campus in Sale or Traralgon or somewhere closer would provide easier access for one to tertiary education it would hopefully prove to be a motivator for students to attend, knowing it is easier to get there. However, it would be imperative to ensure that adequate transport is provided to and from rural towns to these larger towns, obviously so that students are able to get to and from uni. There is no point, really, in putting a campus there or putting in such resources as videoconferencing if they cannot actually attend.

Also we believe career counselling should be introduced a lot sooner into both primary schools and secondary schools. That is due to a lot of the older role model evidence, which suggests that students would rather drop out of school than complete it and go on to tertiary education. We believe career counselling really needs to be in place a lot earlier to try to motivate students to want to go on to uni. My group of friends and I all just assumed that we would go to university; from primary school and on to high school we just assumed that that is what we would do. Obviously things change; at the moment I am the only one there. A lot of the other girls hit year 10 and realised they did not have to be at school anymore if they did not want to be. Career counselling really needs to be in place a lot earlier, and also of course more funding needs to be available for students who need to relocate for their studies.

Finally, the main issue is that we need more financial support for students who have to relocate from rural towns to cities. Monash Churchill is over 100 kilometres away; that is the closest university campus, other than some of the local TAFEs, which run in partnership with RMIT University courses in nursing, midwifery and business. It is still a real stretch. So funding is needed and more scholarships and, obviously, more partnerships within universities and local TAFEs, just to ensure that students are given every opportunity to attend tertiary education.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Rachael. Does anybody have any questions?

Mr HERBERT — You said that you had a problem in schools with some of the younger lads not paying attention and making it difficult for others to study. How does that then equate with using videoconferencing as a mode of learning? I would have thought it would make it even more difficult for those lads to concentrate.

Ms MOORE — Sorry, I meant that videoconferencing would be a good idea should we introduce, say, another campus into another town for tertiary education. I think it would be a good way to allow flexibility for students to attend university and attend their classes rather than having to relocate. I found that disruptive students were detrimental to my study in high school, rather than in tertiary education.

Mr HERBERT — What course are you doing in Melbourne?

Ms MOORE — I am studying applied science, majoring in psychology.

Mr HERBERT — If there was a campus there with a videoconferencing facility, would you have stayed in Sale or would you have still come to Melbourne?

Ms MOORE — I personally still would have come to Melbourne. I guess that is based on my scholarship. But, putting that aside, I think I still would have come to Melbourne just because I do not think Yarram — I do not mean to dis Yarram, but I think it is more feasible to move to Melbourne because of career and educational prospects, everything like that. I do not personally want to take over my dad's farm, so I think Melbourne was a better option.

Mr HALL — First of all, thank you, Rachael, for your presentation, which was really good; and thanks also, Bridget, for putting the group together and initiating this exercise. Rachael, touching on the last point you made about the desirability of students from Yarram attending Monash Churchill, do you think that is an attractive option for students, and, if not, why not; or is it that once they leave secondary school, students want to get

away from Yarram and experience the big lights of Melbourne, so to speak? If there were campuses like there are at Churchill, Traralgon and Sale, would that make a big difference?

Ms MOORE — I think so. I read in one of the other submissions we have here that something like 84 per cent of uni applicants from around Yarram, Traralgon and Sale had listed Monash Churchill down on their preferences list. So there is an obvious desire to attend a closer uni. I myself would, and, through our interviews, the girls who were interviewed said that they would rather move to Melbourne simply to get away from Yarram. It had nothing to do with tertiary education or not going to uni or anything like that. For students where it would not be appropriate for them to move to Melbourne for a number of reasons — whether it be that they needed to stay closer to the farm, or that they were needed at home by their families — a closer university campus would be a really feasible option; they would be able to attend higher education while still being closer to town.

Mr HALL — Rachael, I have one more quick question. It is in regard to the aspirational issue that you spoke about early in your presentation. Do you think students from Yarram get enough opportunities to go to Melbourne during their early years of secondary schooling to see what can be achieved, and therefore come into contact with a bigger range of role models, particularly for the boys? Do they get that opportunity to go and look at other professional areas?

Ms MOORE — I found that I personally did not. I do not know whether that was due to the classes I was taking at Yarram. They did not really allow for such excursions to Melbourne. I found that a lot of the boys in one of my classes had never even been to Melbourne. That was on one of our excursions for, I think, a woodwork class that I took back in year 10. We were 16 at that time and there were some kids who had never even seen the city. I think there needs to be a definite increase in city excursions, careers expos and stuff like that that expose them to city life. Because a lot of them too are scared; they have gone to university and have left behind such a close-knit town.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Rachael, can I ask just one question? You have gone through a number of issues which are problems. What would be two recommendations we could make to Parliament to try to encourage more students to access higher education? What would you like us to say, as your top two?

Ms MOORE — Definitely funding money — and careers. I think more emphasis needs to be placed on careers other your typical trades.

The CHAIR — We might need to wrap this up now. We have another conference that should have started about 5 minutes ago now. Thank you very much. I hope you have appreciated the opportunity to talk to us. We have appreciated the opportunity of being able to try out some videoconferencing direct down to you. Thank you for your participation.

Ms MOORE — Thank you very much.

Witnesses withdrew.

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Witness

Professor W. Adam, acting head, school of rural health, University of Melbourne.

The CHAIR — Bill, welcome to the Education and Training Committee. We are here in Melbourne and I understand you are in Ballarat?

Prof. ADAM — That is correct.

The CHAIR — We are pleased you could join us. We are seeing how video links work, as well as giving you the opportunity to speak to us, as we missed when we were in Benalla a couple of weeks ago. If you would like to make your presentation, we might have some questions to follow up with.

Prof. ADAM — My name is William Robert Adam. I am here as the acting head of the University of Melbourne's school of rural health. The school of rural health is within the faculty of medicine, dentistry and health sciences at the University of Melbourne. The administrative centre is in Shepparton. We have major sites at Ballarat and Wangaratta and have and are developing more minor teaching sites in a number of small towns in north-eastern Victoria.

The school of rural health consists of a rural clinical school, a department of rural health, a centre of excellence in rural sexual health and a primary health care research development program. With the exception of the centre of excellence in rural sexual health, which is funded by the Department of Human Services in Victoria, all are funded by the Department of Health and Ageing. The school provides one year of clinical training to University of Melbourne medical students. About 60 of them, which is 25 per cent, are commonwealth-supported places and about 30 of them stay on for another two and a half semesters for all their clinical training. We also provide short-term rural placements for students in all health sciences, with currently most active participation by medical, dental, nursing and physiotherapy students. We undertake and support the development of capacity for rural health research, including in public and population health and indigenous health.

The school of rural health does not directly recruit undergraduate students. This is carried out by the university. However, the school has sought to increase recruitment of rural students for tertiary studies by community activities, including talks in schools and supporting the Academy of Sport Health and Education in Shepparton, which is an indigenous program, and the school student group has also been involved in community activities supporting undergraduate recruitment. The curriculum is a Melbourne University curriculum. We have adapted it to teach in the local community by having a greater use of volunteers, using nursing staff in medical teaching, simulated clinical experiences and a greater use of general practice as a site for teaching.

On the benefits and challenges of operating a university campus in a rural area, I believe the visible presence in a rural community of a university campus and the engagement of staff and students with a rural community broadens the experience and understanding of higher education in members of that rural community. Provision of role models for and encouragement of higher education may play some role in increasing the uptake of higher education in rural communities.

The major challenge in running a rural campus is in recruiting and retaining sufficient academic staff, which is influenced by all the demographic issues leading to preferred urban location. The biggest one we find is occupational opportunities — suitable jobs and promotion — for partners of potential staff. This is a major issue in our recruiting problems. The other major issue is the need for partners in success. In the medical school we are dependent on and have received support of the hospitals and other health service institutions so essential for delivering our curriculum.

In terms of online and distance education, we use videoconferencing a lot for teaching and management across our diverse sites. Online access to libraries is an essential replacement for direct access. As we move to further community teaching in smaller communities, high-speed broadband will be an issue for students to access these facilities.

On housing and transport, financial and other support needs, the funding schedule from the Department of Health and Ageing allows us to provide heavily subsidised supported accommodation for students, which has made student training in rural areas much easier and it has made it much more feasible for students to attend our clinical school. It is an issue for rural students, both going to the city or moving to another rural location for their training.

Mr DIXON — You said you have extensive use of videoconferencing. How do you find that as a medium for education? What are the pitfalls?

Prof. ADAM — I have to say that this is one of the better videoconferences I have attended. It is much clearer than some. I have been at the school for five years. There have been lots of problems over the years, but it is getting better and better. A lot of it is bandwidth and better equipment, but it is getting better all the time and becoming more feasible. It takes special training to teach by videoconferencing, particularly if you are taking a local group in the room with you and also having a videoconference. That is not universally available, and it does take special training of teachers to deal with those issues.

The CHAIR — You are in Ballarat. As an MP representing Ballarat, I am interested to know where you are physically operating from?

Prof. ADAM — We are in a building called Dunvegan, which is on the corner of Mair Street and Drummond Street, opposite the hospital.

Mr HERBERT — I must say it seems like you are doing terrific work and it is really good to see that the university has a presence in country Victoria. I have two questions, really. The first is: is it important to have a blend of learning, with videoconferencing, visiting lecturers and in-house tutorials? The second is: do you think that the sort of education you provide in the course is easily transferable to other disciplines?

Prof. ADAM — In terms of clinical training for medical students or other clinical students such as nursing, a lot of the training is done in hospitals, a lot of the training is interactive and requires person-to-person teaching. I think that is true of all clinical training and probably technical training. It is also important in all sorts of education to a degree. You can substitute some of that with videoconferencing or access to video or audio material, such as CDs, and that can provide a venue for some of your teaching, but it is terribly important to get that interactive teaching with students, which can be done only by person to person.

Mr HALL — How important is the rural clinical school to the attraction of medical professionals in your local areas?

Prof. ADAM — We do not know the answer to that yet. The clinical school has been going for five years; the first graduates graduated in 2004. Following graduation it takes anywhere from 6 to 10 years for students to finish their postgraduate training, and so we do not know the ultimate location of many of our students. We have a lot of anecdotal evidence that some are settled in rural areas, but I cannot tell you that it has been a success, and will not be able to tell you for some time.

Mr HALL — No doubt you will track that to see where your graduates end up.

Prof. ADAM — We will within the limits of the privacy legislation.

Mr HALL — The other thing I am going to ask you is in terms of physicians. Are the applicants for positions at the rural school local people or are they broad country people, or is there a mix of both metro and country applicants?

Prof. ADAM — They are a mix of both. The situation is that the requirement is that 25 per cent of students with commonwealth-supported places attend the rural clinical school. The students can express a preference for which clinical school, either urban or rural, and as it turns out now — although not earlier on — there is a rough match between preference and number. Those students vary a lot; some are rural and some are urban.

The CHAIR — Can I ask whether the school of rural health is looking to build or extend the exercise, or is it stable at the moment and you will wait and see before further developments take place?

Prof. ADAM — It all depends on money and fulfilling the contractual requirements. We teach more than the contractual requirements, but there are limits to that capacity. We feel there will be a natural expansion as the number of medical students expand in Victoria over the next few years or the students flow through to the clinical school here. There will be some expansion, but ultimately it is about the size of the program and clinical capacity to teach in the rural areas. But yes, we could take more.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Do you have any programs where you encourage indigenous students to take up courses in science?

Prof. ADAM — We have been involved. The University of Melbourne's faculty of education and also the school of rural health have been involved with the Academy of Sport Health and Education, which is a program which tries to encourage the educational retention of indigenous students in Shepparton by using sport as the attraction. Currently they are doing certificate-level courses. That has been quite a successful program at getting students through to a level where they could enter tertiary education and has had success in some students entering tertiary education, but again these are early days for measuring the ultimate success of that program. The students at the clinical school have a group called mooing health, as in moo for cows, and they have been very involved in trying to deal with students in local communities including indigenous students. Again, it is a long process to achieve the aim of more indigenous students in medicine or science or elsewhere.

Mr HALL — What accommodation arrangements are made for students during the time they are at the rural school?

Prof. ADAM — We have student accommodation at all sites, and it is subsidised for them. Currently they pay about \$40 a week for accommodation. It varies; in Shepparton it is across from the hospital. It is a bit further away in Ballarat and Wangaratta. It is a reasonable level of accommodation.

The CHAIR — I think that is all the questions we have for you, Bill.

Prof. ADAM — Okay, thank you very much.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for your contribution.

Witness withdrew.

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Witness

Mr H. Filer, account director, Victorian State Education, enterprise and government, Telstra.

Mr FILER — My name is Howard Filer. I am the account director for Victorian State Education inside the Telstra enterprise and government team here in Melbourne. I want to talk to some of the issues highlighted here, but most importantly about how ICT can assist in particular in rural and regional education. The most outstanding feature is the delivery of a robust network through the partnership which already exists between the Victorian government and Telstra with the delivery of the TCS contract, which is the network that delivers IP services to all hospitals, schools, police stations and anywhere in Victoria — the 1700 schools are all connected. Any primary school or high school has 10 meg bandwidth going into it right now under the network that you have bought. One important part of that contract which was set in place is that we have a school in a place called Tubbut — I do not know if you know where it is but it is about 50 kilometres due south of Mount Kosciuszko just inside the border — —

Mr HALL — About seven kids!

Mr FILER — Yes. We are investing an amount of money that could see them go to be educated anywhere, to connect that school into the network so they have equality of service. That is based on the way the contract was set in the first place. It is a huge investment by the government and it is a huge investment by ourselves. It is very important and it delivers to all the health facilities around the state and also, for example, to all police stations. We have a couple of police stations in weird and wonderful places too. Importantly, the robust network that sits there that all the connectivity occurs on is managed. You cannot do this as a piecemeal thing; it has to be a singly managed and controlled network, and that is done under the control of the managed network services here at Telstra.

On top of that we can improve and increase the way we deliver connectivity to anybody anytime, and our catchcry for students at the moment is, ‘Any student, anytime, anywhere’. About 99 per cent of the Australian population is covered by our mobile network which I referred to earlier today.

It can deliver up to 21 meg of throughput, so we can deliver movies and videoconferencing like this very simply. I can do it off my laptop. We would be able to do this whole thing from your car. Telstra’s ad with the man standing in the back of a taxi doing a videoconference is real; I can do that for you very easily. That is based on the fact that the investment again has gone into a huge mobile network around Australia and that delivers the services to us, which is going to lead to the students having full-time connectivity with the rollout of the laptops. That means we are going to be able to address some the things — and I will go on in a minute to talk about what Rachael Moore said about being flooded out and having to do her exams or not having the connectivity in her home or in the local town and having to go somewhere else. That is all now covered. It is part of the past; we can move on from that and improve dramatically on that.

Videoconferencing is becoming important. As you mentioned a moment ago, we recently deployed videoconferencing into 18 rooms in 15 schools in the Wimmera area around Ballarat. Those videoconferencing facilities are up and running. With our partners we have been able to deliver some extra equipment for them to encourage the use of it. We are looking into the pedagogy — the way that people teach — how it is going to be taken up and how we improve. As Bill Adam said, the art of being able to deliver a service over a videoconference is something that we would like to get involved with and assist in making sure that is done properly.

The CHAIR — Where are the videoconferencing — —

Mr FILER — In 15 schools within cooe of Ballarat and Bendigo.

Mr HERBERT — They are very remote and they are doing VCE subjects — sharing them. It came up at a community cabinet a few years ago.

Mr FILER — In addition to that we are working very closely with the regional director for the Hume area, Mr Steve Brown, for the deployment of videoconferencing through his major schools. An important part of his deployment is he lost two schools in the recent fires. Through our partners we are going to be able to deliver to him videoconferencing into those schools straightaway. Telstra replaced all the network into the area as quickly as possible, and now we are putting videoconferencing units in those schools to assist not so much with the education but more with the social importance of the impact to the teachers and to the principals and how they are being supported to be able to support their communities. That social networking is being improved in being able to get from Benalla down to, say, Kinglake West, for example. To be able to talk to the staff there is

important. Steve and his deputy cannot always do that as quick as they would like. We are anticipating putting equipment in to make sure that sort of stuff can happen quicker and easier.

Another way in which Telstra is able to support education outcomes is, for example, at the end of April in Lorne there is the principals conference for the Wimmera area. We are going to supply the videoconferencing equipment — not dissimilar to this — with connectivity into the hotel that they are staying in, and also connectivity to the UK to speak to Professor Steven Heppell, and also to Canada. We are going to have it set up so that these international experts in education are going to be able to be on site to deliver a lecture for an hour-and-a-half or so to this principals conference, which we think is a great opportunity to be able to take the international capability of the networks that we have got to deliver a real service to the principals and be able to have them see some of the other work that is being done around the world which, I am pleased to say, is catching up to Victoria.

Another important part of what is Telstra has done is, as I have mentioned earlier today, we are very sincere about the way we would like to see the network and ICT being used to improve educational outcomes. The Ideas Lab in Broadmeadows is set up for exactly that purpose. We have fought very hard, and Susi pushed it through Telstra, for the foundation sponsorship of the Ideas Lab by Telstra. It means that we are going to be in there when the teachers arrive and learn about how they want to apply the technologies and what business solutions they are going to need and putting it in a business format. They are going to sit there and say, ‘What we would like to do is have all the students be able to talk to NASA. We want them to be able to be online from 7 until 10 o’clock at night to be able to do some particular project. We want to be able to collaborate in some way, shape or form — how a mobile phone is going to be used; what does SMS mean; what are iPhones?’.

The instruction from the education department is that each student is going to have two IP devices — one is going to be the new small laptop, the Lenovos or otherwise; and the other is going to be an iPhone or some sort of device, maybe a BlackBerry Bold or similar. They all need to have the connectivity, and they need to know how to use them properly and how to get the most out of them. That is critical. We are getting involved in that part of it as well, so it is important to us to make sure that that moves on.

The important point about it, of course, is that we have to listen to the requirements of the users, so what Rachael and Bill said a moment ago is very important. Rachael’s comment about bus trips was a classic. Working from home is just as easy as learning from home. We encourage this. A lot of businesses do. People work from home, so to be able to learn from home and be able to have a videoconference running off a laptop, or running off your home TV even, is possible. These things can all come together and we can show that. The concept of being limited in where a person can go, and particularly a young lady not being able to change her environment because of her partner wanting to stay in the regional areas but still wanting the education, videoconferencing and some other services that we can offer will absolutely be able to assist in that and reduce the pressure for them to move or put other pressures on their relationship.

You made comments about the lack of support for teachers. One of the big areas we hope to get out of Ideas Lab is to be able to explain to teachers how better they can use the technologies to be able to become more involved and get more into the educational processes that are available using ICT. It is showing up around the world. If you have ever seen a presentation by Steven Heppell, you will know the sort of things that he is talking about and how that comes together.

You spoke of the development of regional centres. The fact that they may have to go some distance to go down to Monash at Churchill or to go to other places can be got around because of the network that is there and available, whether it be in schools or in community centres or in universities or otherwise. These sorts of facilities can be put in at not ridiculous prices. It does not have to be as good as the RPX room, but it could be as easily as good as this, where you could go into a community centre and you could make that facility available. The investment is going to happen, I understand, into schools, and those facilities could be made available at different times of the day for other students in the area. The local primary and high schools could become centres, and this sort of facility can connect into, as I have said before, into any home and any laptop — even mobile phones if you wanted to do it.

Social networking is important, as Rachael said, and is delivered today via the myriad services that are on the web. That is delivered across the network that you have already put into all the schools around the state, so that is fantastic.

Professor Bill Adam spoke of the talks in schools. We had a commercial client who released a product and spent three weeks travelling around the country delivering a 1-hour PowerPoint presentation to 13 different sites. That could have been done in an hour, 20 times in that time, and the training would have been much better. We use that here. We have training every Wednesday at noon. You can come and sit down and learn a new technology, but you sit at your desk and you get the information coming to you live from a WebEx session or otherwise. He was talking about the challenges of recruiting and keeping good staff, and partner support in particular.

Again, with the facilities that are available now and the different ways that you can use some of the technologies we have got, we can improve access to the latest and greatest — to the best pedagogy and to the best facilities in the world — so much so that the Microsoft teacher of the year, according to Steve Brown, is in Shepparton. We are going to take that guy and have him in videoconferences around the state, to be able to talk to other students. Again, the technology is the way we are going to be able to deliver that. We cannot take him out of his classroom and shift him around the state.

The Curriculum Corporation, a national body you will know of, has a requirement from the federal government to put a Chinese specialist teacher in front of about 30 different Chinese teachers to improve the ability they have to teach Chinese in their environments. They have a ridiculous budget to be able to put this person on a bus or car or drive them around Victoria and New South Wales in particular when we could do it in videoconferencing in a matter of days and much easier. You can see the quality that we can get; we could easily handle that.

Bill Adam spoke about the improvement of videoconferencing. There has been a paradigm shift in the way that videoconferencing works. A facility like this would not have existed two years ago. The high-definition videoconferencing is just amazing, as you saw in the RPX room. That uses a lot of bandwidth, and it is ideal for a boardroom setup. But there does not necessarily have to be that much bandwidth; it is not necessary to spend that much on that sort of equipment. Videoconferencing is put into the schools at a lot lower price, and it runs across the schools network, which has already been bought and paid for. So the changes in the kit and the training of the teachers are all very important parts of what we are going to do. But the most important part of all that Telstra does and the way we can add to the support of education in regional and rural Victoria is through the correct supply of an underpinning data network — what we call the fourth utility. Once it goes back to being exactly that, the fourth utility, where everybody just expects to turn on a tap and out comes the IP and it is done properly, like we provide to the schools today — that is what we are proudest of and what we do very well — that will be the best thing we can bring to the table.

Mr HERBERT — The government has spent a fair bit of money putting in interactive whiteboards in the schools. I have noticed that here you have a different type of design, which I understand can double for videoconferencing. Is that the case?

Mr FILER — There are three components to a videoconference. There is the camera, the display and the engine, called a codec — it is actually the box. What you can do with it is to use it as a screen, absolutely. The provision of whiteboards in schools is an ideal opportunity for someone to go in and show them how to use them. We would like to do that as well, because they could be used for videoconferencing; they certainly can be used as projectors for that. I have seen them used in my son's school; they have a whiteboard that is a little different from the one here, but it is basically the same, and we can connect it up and use it as more than just a whiteboard or a slideshow screen. They can connect in.

Mr HERBERT — So you can double dip on part of the infrastructure costs if you are using an interactive whiteboard as a screen or projector, or for videoconferencing?

Mr FILER — Absolutely. It is done. Schools use overhead projectors, like this one that drops down out of here, that can show the same thing, and you can connect that into the system. For example, through our partner, Polycom, we deliver material from NASA, from the Barrier Reef or from the Antarctic, and we can put that not only through a videoconference centre, but we can put it through all projectors in every school, so that every class, any class or any other place can get into it.

The CHAIR — How do we go that next step? You mentioned the centre out at Broadmeadows that you are using to bring in teachers and educate them as to what you are doing. How do you expand these opportunities so that more schools, more principals and more teachers know about it?

Mr FILER — It is communication. I am spending a lot of time talking to as many people as I can and getting involved with people like Steve Brown, who is the regional director for Hume, and also Ron Lake, as well as others in the different regions who have done a great job in making sure the education department puts the Broadmeadows ideas lab together. We have come in just to support it, and the more we put out additional equipment and the more people see the advantages of it, the better the result will be. I will be doing a stand-up presentation at the principals conference for Wimmera and also for Hume to talk about some of these things and explain what can be done. We are ready and waiting to get on with it.

The CHAIR — It sounds great.

Mr HALL — Howard, how do you teach my generation what is available and how to use it?

Mr FILER — That really falls under Susi's remit, and she talks to educators a lot about that exact point. The issues are around making the technologies simple. The way to do that is to get people out there. For example, we have partners who go to different areas. Recently they went to Ballarat to sit down and talk to groups of teachers and say, 'Here's how you do videoconferencing'. I have sat in rooms and shown teachers some things you can do with SMS. We have seen students come in and do amazing things with a Nintendo Wii with a screen; they were doing videoconferencing and all sorts of wild things. That was great. To answer your question, we can do it by sharing the information, setting up formal training, getting the regional heads understanding what is possible, providing more and more education and exposing them to it in their day-to-day lives.

Mr HALL — I understand your focus on the education system as such in getting those skills and that technology into the system, but it is also important to get those skills out into the general public. We as lawmakers in this state need to understand what can be done if we are going to really push and have those things introduced. As you said before, once a week, I think on Wednesday lunchtimes, you sit down at your laptop and you have some formal professional education into some of the tools available through ICT. We do not have that opportunity. We rarely have it. I have had this phone for 12 months, and I have never used it for a video call. I received one video call shortly after I got it, and that was a marketing call from Telstra. But I do not use that on video call. Our new laptops have a camera set in them, and it is possible that this committee meeting could have been held with the Chair sitting in Ballarat, Mr Herbert in Melbourne and me sitting in my office in Traralgon; I presume we could have had that committee meeting using those means.

Mr FILER — That is right.

Mr HALL — But I do not know how to do it. I do not know how to set it up.

Mr HERBERT — They are not connected.

Mr DIXON — It is IT, so it is all right!

The CHAIR — That is right. These opportunities are there, and we do not necessarily know how to maximise our use of what is there.

Mr FILER — The trick there is for me to listen to you and understand you have that requirement, and we will develop, through the group of professionals we have, the solution to be able to deliver the answer to that. We can do that, and we can do it now. I literally used to walk through the building and show people how to make a video call from my mobile phone. If it is required, we can show you how to do it. If you say there is a need, we would love to address it, because the technology is there. Then if we need to train people, we have training available and ready to go. It is a case of letting us know.

Mr HALL — Maybe we need to convince Parliament that that is an important educational process. This week there are committee meetings which would require me to come down from Traralgon on three separate days. I am not coming to two of them because I cannot afford to have three days out of my electorate. But in

each of those cases it would be feasible for me to just sit at my desk in my office in Traralgon and participate in a 2-hour committee meeting and then use the rest of the day to just do the normal electorate work.

Mr FILER — There is no question. As we walked in, I walked straight past it and did not take the time to show it to you. You may have seen on the middle desk on the window side there is a 21-inch screen. That is a laptop replacement screen, but the high-definition videoconferencing uses the same box that drives this room. It runs a high-definition videoconference from your desk. It uses it as your laptop — so three-quarters of the screen could be used as the laptop and the right-hand side could be a videoconference. You would be able to sit and continue working on whatever work you were doing on the presentation you were about to make, and you could be listening to and watching what was going on in the videoconferencing snapshots on the right-hand side. Then you could put your PowerPoint presentation up to the videoconference, and the other participants would see you as well. Then you could come out of that, and you would have done all that without leaving your office. Your preparation time would just remove the drive completely. Life has changed.

Mr HALL — How many participants is it possible to have on such videoconferencing?

Mr FILER — It is pretty much unlimited. It really does run out to large, large numbers. However, if you can imagine the Brady bunch sitting up here on the screen, you could have it so that there was one large snapshot on the left-hand side, three or four across the bottom and two or three on the right; you could have it so there were nine, or you could have it so that there was only one. But if you have it with hundreds — and you can put hundreds of people onto a videoconference — it just makes it impossible to see them. Usually it works this way. It is voice activated — the loudest person gets the screen. Everybody sees that. Or you have it on lecture mode, where the person who is giving the presentation — and that can be switched through the presentation — takes the entire screen. On the right-hand screen you would normally have a PowerPoint presentation. Instead of looking at yourself, you would have the presentation, the spreadsheet or whatever other business you wanted to show.

Mr HALL — Could you have a sitting of Parliament all videoconferenced?

Mr FILER — Technically, absolutely. But I think others would make the decision as to whether we would be allowed to do that.

Mr HERBERT — That is an interesting point. Just when you were talking about Parliament I was thinking there would be no reason why, say, year 10 students undertaking media studies should not learn how to set up a videoconference, how to split the screen and how to focus in on different things as a component of their study. You could actually incorporate that into the school curriculum of students who are interested in it. That would be a good idea.

Mr FILER — It is a very good idea.

Mr HERBERT — I would just like to follow up on Peter's point, because I think it is fairly important. You have spoken a lot about the technical side of the conferencing, and as you say you have partners who speak to teachers, but I was struck quite a lot by the comment that you need to train teachers in the use of this technology as a presentation and teaching tool. So when you talk to schools or regional directors do you have a package you put that is on the one hand hardware and on the other hand software and on the other hand a total professional development package to use the equipment effectively for education? Do you offer that sort of service?

Mr FILER — Today no, but we do want to do that. That is part of the reason why we are in the Ideas Lab though. That is a big part of why we put our partners into Ballarat to train them on the simple technology use of the videoconferencing gear. We have gone in and shown people how they can use whiteboards like chalkboards. Now we want to learn how to use it better and then we will show people how to do that in the same way that we support the correct use of mobile phones and the correct use of other technologies on our network.

Mr DIXON — And the teachers are probably the key people. They know how to teach, and they could probably translate that into technology and help you.

Mr FILER — And we are sharing that information.

Mr HERBERT — Is there anyone who is outstanding at providing that sort of expertise to teachers? Do you have a partner that is a specialist in how you teach using videoconferencing to interact pedagogy with teaching?

Mr FILER — There are several. One of the big ones that we use, of course, is Polycom. We also use Cisco. They both have a large investment in the wellbeing of education around the world. Both of them bring a lot to the table. We partner with them to learn as much as we can to be able to assist that. We are trying to take the emphasis off the technology and put it onto the use. The sooner we are able to do that, the sooner we believe it is going to be a lot more effective.

Mr HALL — My last question: is it popular with kids in schools? Do they like sitting down in a videoconference facility?

Mr FILER — They do. It is interesting that the social networking is the thing that is driving the use of face-to-face communication. That could be as simple as a home event with Skype, which a great way in which people are getting in touch with each other, all the way through to being able to sit in front of classrooms. I have another demonstration tape that we did not have time to show you. It was of a group of students who got together for the Curriculum Corporation conference that was held downstairs. We showed them in this room how four or five different schools would get together and collaborate, and the collaboration is the trick. And they do enjoy that. They hear what other kids are doing, they see what other kids are doing, they share that, they do the same project together. If videoconferencing is a way that they can move forward — great. If there is some other way of doing it — they are swapping a file — then that is great. With videoconferencing they get a buzz out of it. They have fun.

Mr HALL — Kids still want to — and I have said this in the inquiry — get together and socialise in person: drink beer together and everything during orientation week rather than sitting in a room with a couple of others watching — —

Mr FILER — It is a very important point. One of the biggest users of videoconferencing in Australia is Qantas. They obviously see the irony in that. People absolutely have to travel; you cannot not have face to face. But from a business point of view, many of our business customers, instead of travelling 6 times a year or every month, 12 times a year, they travel 3 times a year, and they meet 20 times a year or 30 times a year. They meet every week. They meet every second day because they have got the capability to do it. It just changes the way in which you work. It is just amazing to see it working well.

The CHAIR — That has been very interesting indeed. Thank you very much, Howard, for showing us your facilities here. It has helped us a lot today.

Mr FILER — Wonderful. Our pleasure.

Committee adjourned.