

CORRECTED VERSION

EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE (SUB-COMMITTEE)

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

Colac — 29 April 2008

Members of the Sub-Committee

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Witnesses

Cr C. Smith, mayor,

Ms T. Slatter, chief executive officer, and

Mr M. Barrow, manager, economic development, Colac Otway Shire Council; and

Cr D. Atkinson, mayor, and

Mr A. Paton, grants/business development officer, city growth directorate, Warrnambool City Council.

The CHAIR — I declare this hearing of the Education and Training Committee of the Parliament of Victoria open and welcome our guests this morning. We are going to have a good range of guests, as we did at Hamilton yesterday. These two days are the first in our travelling into regional and rural Victoria in regard to our inquiry into geographic differences as they relate to student participation in higher education. We are certainly looking forward to the presentations that are going to be made to us today.

The only other thing, in formally declaring the hearing open, is that I should remind people who are presenting to us today that in inquiries by parliamentary committees information shared with us is shared under parliamentary privilege, which means that you are able to say what you like and what you feel is relevant without fear of follow up in that regard. We have not had occasion for that to be taken advantage of yet in our inquiry so we will see where it leads.

I think Colac Otway is presenting to us first. Chris, we are pleased to hear from you and then we will be hearing from Warrnambool. Chris, would you like to lead off?

Cr SMITH — First of all, thank you for your welcome and on behalf of the shire I would certainly like to welcome you to our wonderful shire and thank you for taking the opportunity to come into the area to take these submissions and to hear from us today. We really appreciate your coming here.

We just want to go through the submission today and express obviously our desires and feelings regarding further education. On a personal note, since I have been on council the last three years I have been involved in the education steering committee and have also chaired the dairy reference group. So I have a personal involvement in seeing this move ahead rather than just being the mayor, and I am coming to speak today on something I am very personally interested in.

The Colac Otway shire is an area of some 3500 square kilometres with a population of more than 21 000, and about half of that population in the shire of course reside in Colac, our predominant town of which you would be aware and which we are in today. Looking at our key strengths, they are our natural assets. We think we are very blessed to have the land and water availability that we have. Obviously water is becoming a huge issue and we are very pleased to have the water that we have, and obviously the forest and the coast situation. We believe we have an attractive built environment, and we also have within our community wonderful cultural opportunities. We can see it in what we call COPACC (Colac Otways Performing Arts and Cultural Centre), this facility we are in today, with the performing arts and so on.

There is a wonderful range of recreational opportunities. Our health services are very good, through Colac Area Health. Our education in the area of primary and secondary, we believe, is very strong and is really good for what we have. We see that there is a good range of housing options for people to be involved with, whether they want to have a rural lifestyle or be in town, and there is quite a spread of costs and affordable housing in that regard.

We also think that we are in a unique or very good situation with our proximity to other regional centres, whether that be Ballarat to the north, Warrnambool to the west or Geelong to the east. But we also see that that raises some challenges because while we are very well centred to those locations, it also means that it is sometimes difficult for us to attract what we need in our own town. We also have good road and rail links, and we have a diverse range of employment opportunities. So coming off on a lot of things just there very quickly, we see that our community has some wonderful opportunities there.

Our local industry is mostly based on primary production — I am dairy farmer — whether that be farm or forestry, and the processing of those products that come off the farm and the forest. But also tourism provides a wonderful economic opportunity and growth, certainly along the Great Ocean Road and also further into the hinterland and the Otways. There are sound primary and secondary education facilities, as I mentioned before, but our post-compulsory provision is limited and I guess that is why we are here today, to share with you our concerns in regard to that area.

While we have TAFE courses and our adult community education in Colac, we do not have any direct provision of university courses and that is one thing that we see as quite a concern. The Geelong and Colac region skills research project of 2005 reports skills shortages within the Colac Otway shire, and if I can just run through a few of those that most frequently occur.

They are the traditional trades, including construction and building trades. We have a shortage in those trades and also in regard to diesel and general mechanics. Another area that I am acutely aware of is dairy farm hands and people qualified to work in dairying. I have touched on my involvement there with the dairy training reference group.

In the areas of trained and experienced chefs; trained and experienced hospitality staff to do with the tourism industry of course; qualified medical staff; child-care workers; and qualified and experienced hairdressers are just some that we highlight, amongst others. They are seen as areas where there is very much a shortage, and we really need to work in those areas. The report also identifies a variety of strategies for skilled and regional workers, including retraining of existing employees, and we see that as important to allow our trainees to further train and move on; retraining of the existing pool of jobseekers so that people see it is possible to further their opportunities where they are looking for a job; and very importantly, education of young people to assist in their career selection and preparation for the labour market so that they can place themselves in the best possible position to be able to go out into the marketplace; and also targeted skilled migration to the region

If I can just add there on a personal note, my family was involved in sponsoring a family from Zimbabwe some five years ago. They are still with us and have been a great asset to have. But certainly we are looking at targeting skilled migration into the area. Also access to post-secondary compulsory education and training is clearly a key element of solving the rural skills shortage, and we see that as vital.

In 2003 Colac Otway Shire Council completed a tertiary opportunities study which found that skills training and specialised university courses are needed, especially for those in employment and/or with personal time constraints. It concluded that a wider range of options for post secondary education is necessary for economic growth. It also supported post-compulsory education opportunities as essential for social wellbeing. They are just some of the things that have come out of that report in 2003, that was seen as vital for our area.

There are some statistics about the disadvantage that people have within the Colac Otway shire that I am not very proud of as the mayor of the shire. Nevertheless, they need to be mentioned. There is a Jesuit study called 'Unequal in life' and out of all the places that were designated in Victoria and New South Wales, Colac was ranked the 14th most disadvantaged.

That is not something we are proud of, but we are very well aware that we were ranked 14th most disadvantaged. It probably comes about because of the following facts. Forty per cent of Colac residents live in a neighbourhood renewal area. It is significant that 40 per cent of our population are in that sort of situation. But perhaps more alarming is the fact that 74 per cent of males and 65 per cent of females have no qualification beyond year 10. When we look at that, it is something we have been very acutely aware of, and we have been working diligently to try to correct or enhance or improve that situation. But I just want to re-emphasise: 74 per cent of males and 65 per cent of females have no qualification beyond year 10.

Fifty per cent of tertiary eligible students defer their placements. While we have some great outcomes, and it is always great at the end of the year to see the results from our students — they usually get written up in the local press — as I deal with those young people through a variety of opportunities I am concerned that 50 per cent of those that actually get into university defer, and there are a whole range of reasons for that. We will touch on some of those today. More alarmingly, out of those that defer, only 20 per cent will eventually go on to take up their placements. So 50 per cent defer, and there are many reasons for that.

In research conducted by the planning unit of the DHS Barwon-south western region, vulnerable communities were identified as having a high incidence of a series of risk factors, including low income, low educational attainment levels, high stress, long-term unemployment, dependence on pensions and benefits, social isolation, poor mental and physical health and premature death. Colac ranked the lowest; it was identified as the most vulnerable community within the region. Obviously there are some pretty important issues there that have been raised. I would like to take a lot more time to deal with those issues in the area today, but I had better not.

Equitable access to education opportunities in the post-compulsory area is essential to building a culture of lifelong learning in Colac Otway shire and breaking the predominance of low education and low skills, leading to lower paid jobs and unemployment.

It is true that Colac has cities roughly an hour's travel to the west, north and east that are rich in educational offerings: Geelong, Ballarat and Warrnambool. However, high school graduates do not take up tertiary placement

offers in Geelong, Ballarat and Warrnambool due to the cost of living away from home. This is one of the key reasons that only 31 per cent of young people in the south-west are in post-compulsory education, compared with 70 per cent in Melbourne. I emphasise that again: only 31 per cent of young people in the south-west are in post-compulsory education, compared to 70 per cent in Melbourne. And 20 per cent of 18-year-olds are attending university, compared to 51 per cent in Melbourne. I am sure you would be well aware and you do not need me to re-emphasise today some of the problem issues that are obstacles to young people being able to get to the larger towns and cities to be involved with university.

Other single people and those with families face barriers not only in the cost of attending but also in the amount of time spent in travel. Those without private transport face a further barrier, with access only to limited public transport. For young people living in Colac and surrounding areas wanting to travel to Geelong, for example, the train leaves too early in the morning and returns too late at night for effective use for commuting to classes at Gordon TAFE or Deakin University. Of course residents living in rural areas outside of Colac have even more difficulties and greater barriers.

Council is working with education providers in Colac on the development of a TAFE one-stop shop to further coordinate the activities of current TAFE providers in Colac: Gordon TAFE, South West TAFE, Otway Community College and Skills Connect.

We are also researching local needs and seeking to develop a new program for local students. The TAFE centre will be located in the new Beechy Centre education, recreation and community precinct. We are really rapt that in the meeting before last the council passed a motion to move to a joint-use facility with the library and the secondary school, which are combining together; and part of that will have a TAFE centre within it as a one-stop-shop where people can go to locate and be aware of all the courses that are going on across all the TAFE providers.

If well supported by state government funding it could become a generator of increased participation in post-compulsory education and training. We really see this as vital. While we are really excited about the secondary school coming together, we also have a wonderful Catholic college in the town. As I said, from our primary and secondary schooling area we believe we are achieving well above and beyond what perhaps other towns our size would, but it is past that that we fall down and we are really hoping we can improve on that.

In our neighbouring shires access to post-compulsory education and training is also an issue. In the Corangamite shire there is an excellent facility at Glenormiston that operates a range of targeted South West TAFE programs for students. Corangamite Shire Council would like the state government to make an ongoing commitment to supporting the growth and development of the centres as fully funded alternative campuses to the Warrnambool campus of South West TAFE.

In the Surf Coast, on the eastern side of our shire, transport for young people is their biggest barrier to post-compulsory education and training. While Surf Coast townships are closer to Geelong than Colac and there is a better public transport system, the system is not designed to meet the needs of tertiary students, plus many Surf Coast students, like in the Colac Otway shire, live on rural properties and need private transport to travel to educational institutions or to link with public transport.

Moving down to some initiatives that would assist in rural areas, there are a few dot points outlining what I believe would certainly assist in rural areas. First of all, with classes that are difficult to fill, the number of students that are needed to have classes approved should be lower than in metropolitan settings. In other words, post-compulsory rural education should be subsidised. Sometimes we find that an attempt may have been made to run a course but the number enrolled does not come quite up to the number of students that are required, and therefore it does not happen. Unfortunately most of those students do not just simply head off to Geelong or Melbourne to do that. Lowering the number of students required to run a course is a very important issue. Of course TAFE providers have a cut-off level where they believe it is economically viable to run a course, and I believe that perhaps could be reduced or subsidised to make running the course still possible.

Also there is a need for recognition that TAFE courses offer students pathways into their career that are often different to the ones their course has prepared them for. The allocation of TAFE student contact hours relies in part on data related to the employment outcomes of people who attend courses and progress to employment in a related field. In rural areas this is not always possible but the courses are generally accepted as a sound base for

employment in a range of fields. Quite often students will do a study at secondary school and do very well, but then need to move perhaps slightly sideways for their future employment.

Increased federal funding is needed to recover relocation costs and the higher living-away-from-home costs incurred by rural students attending universities and TAFEs in metropolitan and regional centres. Obviously, as you can appreciate, for a 17, 18 or perhaps 19-year-old to have to leave Colac and the support of their family, not only do they perhaps go out for the first time into the wider world and face all those difficulties, but there is also the cost of housing, the cost of transport and the ability to get home on the weekend. All those costs there — and even the cost of family being able to go down to support them during the week — are quite significant.

The increased investment in public transport options for rural populations is something else we see as very important. We need opportunities there for public transport, perhaps trains, that do run at a time when it is appropriate for students.

Our council supports the concept of livability as expressed in the state government's *Provincial Victoria — Emerging Trends in Jobs and Population*, which came out in 2005. Livability attributes include an attractive built and natural environment; cultural and recreational opportunities — which I touched on earlier; access to quality health and educational services; a range of housing — affordable housing options and diversity of housing and lifestyle choices; proximity to a regional city, other regional cities and a network of surrounding townships; the presence of a university; and a range of employment options providing opportunities for changing jobs and jobs for partners.

In conclusion, I would just like to make these statements. If the state government is serious about education services and the presence of a university as key livability factors in rural areas, then greater consideration should be given to equitable access. The statistics on Colac Otway shire's general levels of education and the take-up of tertiary places indicates there is an unfair disadvantage to rural people and rural communities. This is a major factor in Colac's continuing status as a disadvantaged community and a major contributor to the shortage of a skilled and educated workforce. Colac must have access to post-compulsory opportunities to enable lifelong learning for a local population that will support a competitive local economy.

It is also very important in attracting skilled and educated people to Colac, as they and their families will consider education as one of the primary livability factors that will influence their decision. Certainly, if I can just add to that, when we try to attract people that may come — whether they be doctors, lawyers, or other people of that ilk — we know they certainly are looking for a very good education standard for their own children, and they will certainly consider what is available before they come.

My closing remark is that the Colac Otway shire, in accepting its responsibility for local government in its fullest sense, has assessed education and training in the region for present opportunities and participation in training against the background of economic potential for the area. It is concluded that further training of the presently employed and better preparation for those of all ages contemplating employment will not only be a sound investment but also be socially beneficial. I have talked for quite a while, and hopefully you have been able to take a fair bit of that in. It is certainly something that I and the shire are passionate about. We accept the studies that have been taken, and we see that further education is the way that we can enhance our community. I thank you for the opportunity. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

The CHAIR — Thanks, Chris.

Mr DIXON — What TAFE campus is here in Colac? It is part of South West, is it?

Cr SMITH — Yes, we have the Gordon, we have South West TAFE, we have what used to be called ACE but is now the Otway Community College, and we also have SkillsConnection.

Mr DIXON — You have got Gordon and South West; do they complement each other in the courses they offer, or is there duplication?

Cr SMITH — They do at times. It is something that we are working with them on and they are working together to certainly do that better. That is one of the things we are excited about with the global connector. At times what we have experienced and sometimes what can happen is that one provider can offer a training opportunity and unbeknown to them perhaps someone else is offering that, and they may get five each and neither

may see it as viable to move ahead with it. We see it that there are areas where we can work better together. That is why we are very excited about the opportunity where somebody from the community who wants to be involved in post-secondary education can enter the global connector and go to the one shopfront and be told about what is going on. We are also very keen to have that shopfront be able to provide the full extent of what we want as well.

Mr KOTSIRAS — One of the main reasons why students are deferring or are not going on is their finances.

Cr SMITH — Absolutely, yes.

Mr KOTSIRAS — How difficult is it for a student to find a part-time job in Colac? And is the council doing anything with local businesses to try to encourage some of them to take on students as a way of them meeting their financial needs?

Cr SMITH — Yes, generally we find there does not appear to be a problem with young people finding work. Generally they are fairly motivated young people who have obviously done very well in their study and are looking forward to going to university. I am certainly not aware of too many of them — in fact I have not come across any of them; all the students I talk to who are deferring seem to be able to find good employment. The businesses around town seem to be very keen to take on those students and to encourage them, even with the realisation that potentially they may have them for only 12 months or two years. But bear in mind that perhaps that also leads to why only 20 per cent of the students go on, because a lot of those students find reasonable work — perhaps not to the extent that they would have preferred.

I will not say they get trapped, but they perhaps start working for 12 months, they suddenly have an income, they are respected by their workplace and they stay in that workplace. The sadder part of that is that perhaps the potential of those students is not fully realised, because they could go on. They perhaps love the area and could perhaps do the university and come back to the latest employment situations.

Ms SLATTER — Yes, it is not part-time work to complement their study. It is that they tend to defer and work and then that in itself acts as a barrier because they do not want to leave home, or they might not be able to afford to leave home. Geelong, Warrnambool, Ballarat and Melbourne are all not far, but they are way too far for an 18-year-old.

Cr SMITH — Yes. More to the part time I would suggest that there are not many students attending TAFE in the other regional centres or Melbourne who would be doing part-time work, simply because they would either have to reside in those towns, or by the time they got home at night it would be far too late and they would have to leave for school in the morning. On the weekend some of them would perhaps be trying to support themselves, but it is very difficult.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Do those students who go on come back to live in Colac? What is the council doing to encourage those students to come back to live and set up a family in Colac?

Cr SMITH — I do not have the statistics on what percentage come back, but there are certainly quite a number. I will give you an example, if I may, but it is not of someone who has come back yet. Recently we had Minister Pike in town to turn the sod on the new school. One of the students there who was representing the school, a year 11 student — who will not enjoy the new facilities as such — is very excited because her plan is to get back as soon as she can as a teacher to teach in the town. So there is a reasonable, but I would not say that it is a — —

Mr KOTSIRAS — But is council doing anything in terms of advertising and promoting businesses in the area trying to encourage those students to come back — your doctors, your lawyers, those who do go on and who maybe go on to Melbourne to do a course? Is anything done to promote bringing them back to Colac?

Cr SMITH — I am not aware that we specifically have — —

Mr BARROW — No, we do not have a program; we have tried that in the past and it has not been terribly successful. The statistics tell us that we do have an outflow of young people from 18 to 25 who are looking for education and career opportunities. Our inflow of people are 35-plus, and many of them are of the 55-plus early retirement age. Those people who are coming into our shire who are 35-plus with a family are, generally speaking, people who have been brought up in Colac and are choosing to return. We do not choose to have a strategy to

compete with other rural or regional areas or metropolitan areas of the state. It is a self-defeating strategy; it is something that cannot be sustained in terms of the resources you need to put into that. We would love to encourage people to come back to Colac Otway, and I guess we try to do that by providing the kinds of lifestyle facilities that make it attractive, without having a specific targeted campaign. We look after things like the attractiveness of the city and making sure we have recreational, cultural and arts activities which are a high priority for young people. We try to make sure that we have good educational opportunities and all of those kinds of lifestyle things that will attract people back. It is a holistic approach to this.

Cr SMITH — If I may just add one further thing. I guess one of the other reasons why we are keen to see young people do their further training in Colac is that they simply do not have to leave and it is not a case of then having to attract them back. They can simply do their training in Colac and remain with family and friends through to their 20s and then settle down. We do not have to worry about trying to get them back if they have not left.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Do you think the universities should offer bonuses for students in regional and rural Victoria for courses?

Ms SLATTER — To return?

Mr KOTSIRAS — No, bonuses to get into a course?

Cr SMITH — I do not know about bonuses, but certainly there needs to be some further financial help to overcome accommodation and transport and those issues. We would also like to see some way that with some university courses — not the full range but some university courses — it is appropriate to have them held out-of-campus, if you like, or out of their normal campus in Colac, or at least parts of them. That would have to be seen as in what areas are identified as being appropriate. But I think that could also help.

Mr BARROW — I might add to that answer, if you do not mind. I think most universities and TAFEs have a scholarship system. That is great if you know about it, but they are not widely advertised. If your kids are notified about it and they are willing to apply and go through a competitive process, they might be one of the lucky three out of all the rural people to get a scholarship of usually around \$3000 for four years' tuition. It is a bit of a token effort.

The CHAIR — The last question is this: do you have students who commute to, for example, Deakin in Ballarat?

Ms SLATTER — In Geelong?

The CHAIR — I meant 'in Geelong'.

Cr SMITH — Yes, we do.

The CHAIR — So it is possible. And does public transport work for them? Or would they have to use private cars?

Cr SMITH — No, usually they would have to use private cars. It also becomes difficult, because unless you are doing the same course it is difficult to even pool cars. The class for one course might finish at 3.00 p.m. and the other at 5.00 p.m. and it makes it difficult. Yes, there is quite a cost impost on the families, and the time — I should emphasise the time, especially for when they come from out in one of the rural areas. It could be 20 minutes to Colac and a further hour to Geelong, and there is an hour and a half that is lost either side for the day before you even do any study.

The CHAIR — Thanks; we might have some more questions for you later. David, would you like to come down and speak to us and share the view of the Warrnambool City Council?

Cr ATKINSON — Warrnambool certainly appreciates the opportunity to make this presentation today. I believe some information was forwarded to you earlier. Council is very much aware of the life, vibrancy and economic contribution that higher education brings to our city. The city of Warrnambool is one of the five fastest-growing cities in Victoria. The current population is 32 000, but we are planning on having about 50 000 by the year 2030. Warrnambool is the centre of the education sector of the great south-west. Deakin University's Warrnambool campus has 1200 on-campus students, including 240 in residence. We also have a large TAFE

presence, but no residential students are attached to that particular facility. There are four secondary colleges within the boundaries of Warrnambool, catering for 3500 students. New investment in the great south coast region is estimated to be in excess of \$6 billion. Today to assist with the presentation I have asked Andrew Paton, who is an economic development officer in the city growth directorate at the Warrnambool City Council, to further enhance the presentation.

Mr PATON — In addressing the terms of reference of this inquiry Warrnambool City Council is aware that the number of students in year 12 VCE in the south-west of Victoria has been declining or is at least static, that university participation rates of south-west Victorian students are less than the state average and that rates of deferral for south-west Victorian students who are offered a university place are double those of Melbourne metropolitan students. Indeed Warrnambool's largest secondary college, Brauer College, reported in 2007 that of its 2006 year 12 cohort nearly one in two students who were offered a university place deferred the offer.

So why the low participation rates and high level of deferrals relative to their Melbourne counterparts? It is probably no surprise to members of the committee that the findings presented in our submission indicate the common barriers to higher education are financial ones. While other reasons are evident in responses — for example uncertainty about future career paths, to travel, to take a break from study — the main difference, particularly in the deferral rates between rural and metropolitan students, is financial. This is anecdotal evidence only, but in a recent conversation a family member based in Melbourne and attending university in Melbourne expressed dismay about the cost of public transport in Melbourne, which was I think costing them \$2000 a year. Some perspective was quickly restored when reminded that the cost of sending a regional or rural university student to Melbourne was of the order of \$10 000 to \$20 000 a year depending on circumstance.

It is the costs of this magnitude which are of course very real to the some two-thirds of Warrnambool's local students who enrol at university and move to Melbourne. This pathway is chosen for a variety of reasons — firstly, to pursue their chosen course which is not offered locally or perhaps the perception that Melbourne courses are more prestigious or perhaps a desire to experience other locations. The feedback that we are receiving is that the high level of deferrals is influenced by the Centrelink mechanism of support, where students qualify for independent youth allowance after being out of school for an 18-month period. The number of deferrers who return to study varies, but at Deakin's Warrnambool campus it is thought that between 50 to 80 per cent usually enrol the following year.

What about the school leavers who do not go on to higher education? Local school careers advisers suggest that many school leavers are taking up low-skilled, low-paid work in part-time and casual positions, especially in retail and hospitality. The council has obvious concerns that this lack of investment in their future training and further education leaves them vulnerable in a job-changing market and also further widens the pool of skill shortages in the region. The challenges, strategies or proposed remedies are discussed in the written submission, and I will not go into too much detail, but I did want to highlight a couple of areas, particularly schemes to encourage rural and regional students to attend university.

The first is perhaps a greater scale of rural and regional cadetship schemes or mentoring schemes, presumably where students could undertake holiday or part-time work with employers offering a job to students at the end of their course. The second is a greater promotion of benefits to students and their local communities of investing in higher education, particularly the promotion of encouraging students to earn where they learn, and there is some evidence that suggests that graduates are more likely to seek work where they trained. The final one is, if the high cost of rural and regional students attending university in Melbourne cannot be overcome, it appears that more incentives need to be created for regional campuses to offer a wider range of courses in a cost-effective way — for example, this could be via the sharing of resources or programs between regional university campuses or more use of online learning.

In summing up, Warrnambool is going through an unprecedented level of economic growth. If a significant section of Warrnambool's population is not participating in higher education and gaining professional and other qualifications, this will inevitably have an impact on the city's productivity, skill shortages and knowledge-based economy. Warrnambool City Council strongly supports the presence of a thriving university campus in its region and the benefits it provides.

There is no doubt that continuing low participation rates to higher education and financial barriers to further study potentially threaten this scenario. That concludes our presentation. We thank you for the opportunity to present. We look forward to your findings and welcome any questions the committee might have.

The CHAIR — Thanks, Andrew.

Mr DIXON — Part of Warrnambool's growth obviously is new families moving into the area. Do you think when families with young kids, or even before they have children, move in they are probably just concerned about primary schooling or the next couple of years and they just do not think through the further education options when they, for example, leave Melbourne and go to a regional centre? How do we address that?

Mr PATON — I think that is probably right. I guess I myself am a case in point. I have recently returned to Warrnambool, and my myopic concerns are where am I going to send my children to primary school. I certainly have not thought that far down the path. Certainly the presence of a university campus is a big attraction for a regional city. I mentioned the economic benefits it brings. It contributes about \$32 million in gross regional product to the area, 216 jobs and all the associated research attached to that. It is a difficult question to answer about whether we should have the foresight to be thinking about where to place our kids in 20 years time. I would like to think that the infrastructure will be in place in 20 years time so that I will avoid that dilemma.

Cr ATKINSON — It will be a good challenge for this particular committee.

Mr KOTSIRAS — What are the main skill shortages in the region?

Mr PATON — Certainly at the moment it is well documented that we have skill shortages in the meat industry. Certainly dairy and meat are our core areas, but we also have a high profile in the services sector, in particular education, allied health and also tourism. So without being specific to too many sectors, I think it is across the board. We are concerned that we are losing people to the region, and a major bias in my presentation was towards encouraging students to come back to the region. I know that there is a strong incentive for local employers to employ local students, because they know that they may have a greater commitment to remain in the region. There is certainly evidence of people coming from Melbourne to work in Warrnambool accounting firms or hospitals and returning after several years back to Melbourne to be with family or for greater promotion opportunities or indeed salary.

Mr KOTSIRAS — So then how would you balance what the students want to do and what the region wants them to do, because perhaps the students will have an interest in an area where there is no shortage in your region? Is any work being done to encourage or assist to show the pathways for these students?

Cr ATKINSON — You could suggest that the part of the campus of the Australian Technical College that is being set up in Warrnambool will go some way towards providing other opportunities. The TAFE college and Deakin University work fairly closely together to try and respond to the needs of the community in the sorts of courses they do provide, but of course they are constricted by their own internal politics as to how they go about funding various courses. We work very closely with industry and with the education facilities to try and identify those needs shortages within our community.

Just one example that was raised a moment ago by Andrew was the skill shortage in the meat industry. Midfield Meats contend that if they had 100 skilled workers they would be able to put on 250 unskilled workers. That is a big opportunity for our wider community. It does not go down the field of education, but it certainly opens up a whole possibility for our city in catering for those 50 000 people that are going to be there in another 20 years time.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Can I ask you both how you lift the aspiration of parents? A lot of students do not go on because there is no pressure and there is no reinforcement at home for them to go on, so how do you lift the aspiration of parents?

Cr ATKINSON — I think it is the fear of not being financially able to go on, and many of the children themselves feel that they do not want to put that pressure on their parents. They will back away, and they will take the easy option of getting a part-time job and building up a small income base for themselves, and when it comes time to perhaps go back to complete their course they have all of a sudden found they have got a degree of independence that they are able to pursue.

As was mentioned before by Colac Otway Shire Council, that is really not a good thing for any of our community members. We must be able to give them the opportunity to pursue, if necessary, a university education but certainly a tertiary education of their choosing. We have to have a range of possibilities and with them the financial opportunities to be able to do that.

Cr SMITH — If I could just add to that, I think also a lot of 17 and 18-year-olds are very well aware of the family's finances. Perhaps if we go back a couple of generations, maybe they were not, but these days I think they are very well aware of what the situation is. They may have an older brother or sister who may have created a lot of angst within the family or maybe they have seen the hardship the family has gone through to try to put that person through. I think they are very acutely aware of the pressures that it brings.

Mr BARROW — If I could just add to that, another issue in Colac is that we have a fairly large manufacturing population — in fact our manufacturing growth has outstripped the average Victorian growth. Traditionally we have a lot of low-paid employment in the production of primary industry products like timber and dairy products and meat, so there has not been the need in the past. There is still a generation of parents who have not had to aspire to that. I think it is not so much about lifting their aspirations; I think many of them aspire for their children to do better than themselves.

Our strategy through the building of the Beechy Centre precinct, which is a new school campus that combines the two state schools in our region onto one site with a new multipurpose and multi-use library and cultural, artistic and recreational facilities in the one area and linking them to TAFE, is about creating a lifelong experience. It is about creating a good, vibrant experience for young people at school, so that they feel that they want to be in school and want to stay connected with school. The experience with the old Gordon TAFE campus — it was built on the old Colac tech school site and became the college — was that young people who did not have a good school experience were not going to return to TAFE because it was on the same campus. This way, by building a new campus which has a much more open and accessible style and is much more linked to IT and global possibilities for young people, we hope to provide that experience. We have seen examples of that in other regions of Victoria where opening up that kind of experience for people encourages them to be there. So generationally this will change and the aspirations of Colac will change. I guess what we are asking for is support from government which has the resources to provide this support to make sure that there is an opportunity for people who want to go on to further training to do it here or to be able to afford to do it elsewhere.

The CHAIR — Can I just follow up with Warrnambool? You have a Deakin campus down there. I presume it is limited in the courses that it offers, but I have not seen that.

Cr ATKINSON — It is not the full range.

The CHAIR — I know clearly that it focuses on the marine and aquaculture area as a specialty area. I presume it offers a number of other courses as well.

Cr ATKINSON — There is nursing and commerce and some education courses are available through there as well.

The CHAIR — Has there been discussion about expanding the course range availability or even providing a start, a first year or two of a degree course, at Warrnambool that might be completed at Geelong?

Cr ATKINSON — Some of that is happening now. The school of medicine is being opened formally on Thursday. That will certainly have an impact on Warrnambool to some degree because we will be having students from that faculty attending Warrnambool. There are opportunities. We are in constant discussion with Deakin University about promoting Deakin's presence in Warrnambool. We have a very good working relationship with the vice-chancellor and the faculties. We would always be pursuing a broader range of opportunities to be available at Warrnambool. Of course it comes back to what they can afford to put in place, too.

Mr BARROW — Could I just add something to that answer?

The CHAIR — Sure.

Mr BARROW — In relation to TAFE training, OTTE, it seems to me from discussions with the Gordon, allocates hours related to employment outcomes within an industry for which the training is designed. There is a

situation at the moment in this region where we have a growth in tourism and hospitality — a growth in jobs and in people wanting to do hospitality training — but OTTE is saying that there are not the outcomes in employment in those areas when it does its tracking over a period of time.

The point Chris was making before was that although that may not happen, these courses are very good starting points for all people in whatever career they go into and having an educated community is really an important thing. There is a bit of a discrepancy there in what the desire is and what the institutions understand as demand.

The CHAIR — Indeed. That is a good point. One of the issues we have been looking at is the Melbourne University model of having a more generalist junior degree approach that then could be offered more across regional Victoria, too, or something like that. Thank you for your endeavour; that has been great. It has been a good start to the day.

Cr SMITH — We appreciate the opportunity.

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

Colac — 29 April 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

Ms T. Hancock, executive officer,

Mr P. McDonald, treasurer, and

Mr V. Callaghan, member, South West Local Learning and Employment Network; and

Dr J. Henry, board member, Smart Geelong Region Learning and Employment Network.

The CHAIR — We are going to hear from the South West LLEN (Local Learning and Employment Network) now and the Smart Geelong Region LLEN.

Ms HANCOCK — I am happy to open. I assume that you received the South West LLEN submission?

The CHAIR — Yes.

Ms HANCOCK — I will not speak to all the recommendations, but my board has asked that we refer to the paper as much as we can. I would like to just speak generally about the board's perceptions, and then I will introduce Vince Callaghan later.

It is the opinion of the South West LLEN that, although appreciated, this parliamentary inquiry could follow many similar inquiries that look into these issues of inequity. We implore members to see this valuable process through to its end. Addressing the issues raised will require action and substantial change.

We are talking about grave inequities and, if left unaddressed, the long-term consequences for individuals, families, communities and Australia's economy in general and in the future. I guess what the South West LLEN wants to reiterate is that this is an economic argument. It is economic for both students and for schools. Even after we address the issue of the dollar inequities, we still need to address the perceptions — I note that you were talking about that before — that are generational and that therefore affect aspirations.

We can give an example of going into the schools and delivering a program called Parents as Career Transition Support (PACTS). It is delivered by a person who does not belong to the school, and that person goes in and talks about the structures and how schools function. Overwhelmingly wherever we deliver that we get the same response — that is, that parents have no idea. The school system has changed so dramatically and so quickly that parents are unable to give good solid advice based on the structures that exist.

I am happy to speak to the recommendations, although I am sure you will ask if you want me to reiterate any. The final recommendation that we talk about is that education policy needs to be developed through a better method which accepts the rural disadvantage and creates a positive discrimination to compensate for this when funding programs and projects. I have got a really good example of that. Currently the funding for the trade training centres has been released, and in Victoria schools are advised that there are certain criteria for obtaining the money.

If you look at Corangamite — and I note that Corangamite has not been represented here as a local government — you will see that Corangamite schools are extraordinarily disadvantaged in their ability to respond to those selection criteria. Criteria no. 1 is that the schools cluster. The difficulty that the schools have even to come together to have a discussion, in comparison to a metropolitan area, is indescribable. To have a discussion with another school, some teachers would have to take 4 or 5 hours off, so even the CRT involved in that is really restricting. I would imagine that some schools in Corangamite would just not be able to respond to that trade training funding, and I use that as an example of why we made that recommendation 12.

Again, I ask members of this inquiry to give real consideration to what the South West LLEN has said as a network of stakeholders that are knowledgeable, experienced, active, engaged and concerned for the future of higher education provision in the south-west.

To reinforce some points and to contextualise our situation, I would now like to introduce Mr Vince Callaghan, who has spent 30 years in higher education in rural and regional Victoria in the main. Vince has been a spokesperson for the Australia and New Zealand Student Services Association and spokesperson for the Student Financial Advisers Network of Australia. As well as this he wrote the Austudy guide for 10 years. Vince has developed and delivered a program called Can my wallet afford it?, which addresses the two main issues of cost of higher education and the knowledge and value of education amongst a listening audience in rural and regional Victoria. I would go so far as to say that, although now retired, he is an expert on the topic which we are now interrogating, and I commend his opinions to this inquiry.

Mr CALLAGHAN — I am just retired from the Deakin University Warrnambool campus.

In 30 years of being involved in tertiary education at Melbourne State College, which is now part of the University of Melbourne, and then at the Warrnambool institute and then at Deakin University I have had an opportunity for all those years to really push for the areas of regional disadvantage. The reason that I started when I was at

Melbourne State College was that it was very clear even then from a document that was put out in the early 1980s that regional Australians were three times less likely to want a tertiary education than their metropolitan counterparts. I have spoken at, I think, six commonwealth inquiries over those years, both House of Representatives and Senate inquiries. I sat down with Professor Bruce Chapman when they were going to bring in the HECS charge, which I opposed at the time, so I have been involved over all of those years.

One of the things that really has bugged me over those 30 years is that nothing has changed. We still have a situation and another inquiry where we are saying, 'Why is there disadvantage? Why is it that regional students are not going on?'. I was interested in going back to 1999, when Dr David Kemp, who was then the federal education minister, said that there were huge regional disparities in participation rates. He went on to say that the system current at that time had no capacity to reduce the disparities. Then he said that 19 to 21-year-olds in the top five affluent capital city suburbs were five times more likely to go to university than the five areas at the bottom of the list.

The five areas at the bottom of the list were — guess where — country Australia. So over those past 30 years there has also been numerous reports highlighting disadvantage. I have them all. For example, in 1983 the Australian Vice Chancellors Committee stated:

There should be a policy of financial assistance which will counteract the disincentives which are deterring many of our ablest young people from tertiary education.

In 1994 the National Board of Employment, Education and Training (NBEET) said in a major report:

As a matter of urgency the commonwealth, in close consultation with the states ... should review the current financial assistance schemes and develop new guidelines specifically for financial assistance for rural students undertaking tertiary education.

This has not happened. So the issues of disadvantage have been well documented, but, quite simply, nothing has been done. The commonwealth government brought in scholarships, but scholarships are really bandaid measures. They do not look at the infrastructure.

So here are the issues: regional students are still three times less likely to participate in education. If they choose not to, that is fine. But if their lack of participation is influenced by a perception of the value of further education or the cost of that education, then this is clearly a major concern.

One of the points made earlier was about deferment. The problem with deferment is that a lot of students are taking the time off in order to get the \$18 000 that is required in order to become independent, but the leakage is quite substantial. A lot of students are just not going back. The figure of between 50 and 80 per cent was mentioned. My information is that it is more like 50 than 80.

Let us consider the second point of not participating because of the cost of education or a lack of understanding of the value of further education. For many families in regional areas the student completing secondary education is the first in the family to do so. Knowledge of the courses available and their long-term educational or employment value is often an unknown. There needs to be a mechanism to get good information to parents and students.

Students have careers and school counsellors, but parents do not, and parents are a huge influence on the future of their children. Information which is good, reliable, in plain language, is extremely important to both parents and students. To assume that schools or Centrelink are able to impart this sort of information in an understandable way is often asking for miracles.

Two things have to happen. The first is a big one, and it is the hardest. It is the infrastructure problem. As NBEET said in its report, there needs to be a major overhaul of Austudy and youth allowance. The last time there was any research into the adequacy of what was then Austudy was in 1992. There has been nothing since. That was done by Professor Chapman. In that area a lot of the recommendations that are in the South West LLEN are things that need to be looked at; things like, for example, if a student who is on youth allowance gets employment then they are not allowed to earn more than \$6000 without it affecting their benefits. That has not changed since 1993. So there is a whole lot of things that have not happened.

This is not a major infrastructure problem, but we need to maintain the regional campuses of universities, even though the cost of maintaining those regional campuses is quite significant. And also the course offerings are very limited on many of the regional campuses, and that needs to be looked at as well. Just as an example, the courses

that my two boys wanted to get into — one was civil engineering and one was international business — were not available on the Warrnambool campus, and in moving our kids to Melbourne we did not get any change out of about \$35 000 a year. That is a significant amount of money and it is quite a deterrent.

Finally, families need something which is affordable and simple. For many regional families their student is the first in the family to participate in further education. A program to assist parents to get good, reliable, plain-language information about the value of education and the costs involved in education is essential. When I was at Deakin we got some commonwealth equity money to put together a guide ‘Can my wallet afford it?’, which was a plain English guide to explain, mainly to parents but also to students, the cost of education and how to offset those costs. Along with that I was running workshops right throughout Victoria, and I ran 18 last year, as far afield as Swan Hill, Seymour and Hamilton. In Hamilton we ended up with 400 people in the audience, so obviously people felt that they either did not have the knowledge or did not have enough knowledge.

It was interesting this morning to read in the Warrnambool *Standard* that a senior member of the Deakin fraternity, their pro vice-chancellor, was talking about deferment and saying that students needed to take 18 months off in order to become eligible for youth allowance, which is not correct. So even senior people in educational institutions do not get it right, and good information is really important. The workshops have been very successful, but it should not be affiliated with the university. It should be something which is hands-off and hands-free — but good information, good workshops. That is a cheap option.

The CHAIR — Does John want to add something?

Dr HENRY — Yes, if I could. First of all, I would like to say that I support everything that Tony and Vince have just said. It lines up with the Geelong LLEN’s consultations. It is important that I make the point that Geelong, although it is much closer to Melbourne, is really a microcosm of communities across Australia. So within the Geelong regional LLEN the communities that are represented are country regions — neighbourhoods that are, if you like, lower socioeconomic regions as well as upper middle to higher socioeconomic regions, so there is a whole gamut of communities within Geelong which makes Geelong quite an interesting representative set of communities and also relevant to issues that this inquiry is addressing.

What I have tabled is some data on higher education participation in the Geelong region, gleaned from data that was available to me from 2002–03 through to 2006. If you could bear with me, I would like to quickly take you through that, so you have a clear idea of what is happening in the Geelong region. The first page shows the number of year 12 completers in the Geelong region and it breaks it up according to school sector — government, Catholic and independent. You can see that the government schools have the overwhelming majority of students, and the Catholic and independent schools are even with the remainder. The trends are interesting, though. The trends are decreasing in the government schools over those three years of data. Over the page is the year 12 destinations for all of the year 12 completers.

We are interested in the blue graph, which is the higher education graph. That is what it looks like for all schools; hovering around 40 per cent of young people who complete year 12 go on to university. When you break that down to gender you will see that young women are more likely to go on to higher education than young men.

The next page, page 3, looks at government schools. It is the same set of graphs but now only for government school year 12 completers. You can see there is a marked decrease from the average on the previous page. Young people completing year 12 at government schools overall — not in every individual school case but overall — are less likely to go on to university. The gender differential holds up and is quite stark there as well. You are looking at averaging for those years below 30 per cent of young men from government schools who go on to university.

For non-government schools the same set of data representation is there. It is a much higher percentage of young people completing year 12 from non-government schools who go on to university but it is still only around 50 per cent, slightly above 50 per cent. These are year 12 completers, and again the gender differential holds up.

What I have shown on page 5 is the universities that young people in Geelong who complete year 12 go onto. Deakin University captures almost 50 per cent of them. This is interesting. Geelong has two university campuses located there. Warrnambool also has a campus of Deakin University, and I will comment on that later. The top graph on page 5 shows the actual numbers. These are aggregated numbers for the years 2002, 2003 and 2004. The bottom graph represents the same data but now shows percentages.

At the top of page 6 I have thrown in a graph which shows the gender difference within the university cohort, so for each sample, the Australian Catholic University represents 1 per cent of higher education enrolments from Geelong — that is, 57 students — and of those 57 students, 96 per cent are young women. That is how to read that graph.

You will see that across the universities, and with Deakin University for example, 59 per cent of the young people taking up courses are young women. You only get a shift in the gender balance when you get to Swinburne and it evens out at RMIT. That is telling us something about what is happening between young men and young women in the Geelong community.

The graph at the bottom of page 6 shows the distribution of the Deakin enrolments across campuses. You can see that as a percentage only 6 per cent of Deakin enrolments go to the Warrnambool campus, and 57 per cent of the Deakin enrolments stay in Geelong. Actually it is more than that because we have two campuses; the Warrnambool campus and the Geelong campus. In actual fact 90 per cent are staying in Geelong.

What I have done for the remainder of this data presentation is look at the university enrolments according to the statistical local areas in Geelong. This is now starting to give you an indication of socioeconomic background, if you like, and other factors which you can read into this.

The CHAIR — How are those boundaries developed for the areas — Geelong, South Barwon, Corio?

Dr HENRY — What do the boundaries look like?

The CHAIR — Yes. How were they derived? Is it by postcode?

Dr HENRY — I am not sure. I think it is by postcode, yes. It is the way the ABS gathers statistical data. Bellarine inner and Greater Geelong part B is from Newcomb out to the Bellarine Peninsula. Geelong itself is the central Geelong area. South Barwon inner is Belmont, Grovedale, Oberon and out that way, down to the south it draws students from Torquay and down that area.

Corio and inner Geelong west is Norlane, Corio, Geelong north and coming into West Geelong, but it is also picking up student from the Golden Plains Shire out Bannockburn way. The numbers of university enrolments are on the top graph on page 8, but as a percentage overall you can see there is quite a variation. Bellarine inner, and Greater Geelong part B are much less likely to go on to university. In Geelong it is a higher percentage. This is a percentage of their cohort. The 54 students who went on to university in 2006 from Bellarine inner et cetera represent 23 per cent of the cohort of students — year 12 completers. That is how to read that.

The deferred figures are on the next set of graphs on page 9. You can see the deferment for one of the more economic depressed areas — Corio inner and Geelong West — is much lower than the more affluent areas, but those deferment figures are not as high as those you would find in country areas. That is the Geelong data.

I thought I would throw in the chart on page 10. This comes from a project that a number of us were working on in the faculty of education last year. It is called Deakin at Your Doorstep. It was a project that was funded internally by the university to look at alternative ways of delivering teacher education courses, and perhaps other courses, out into country areas to what is called a community-based model. That graph shows the data for the average yearly destinations for young people from the schools from Apollo Bay in a crescent up through Mortlake, Ararat, across to Warracknabeal and up to Kerang, and then up the Murray River to the South Australian border and back down to the coast.

If you imagine all of that western part of Victoria, this is what it looks like from 52 secondary schools' amalgamated later. You can see that that on average 744 young people go on to university but 269 are offered places and defer. We were looking at a way of delivering out to those communities through Deakin that would mean they would not have to relocate from home. I think that project has stalled at the moment within Deakin, but if you are interested in the project report I can make it available to you.

The CHAIR — I expect we would be. It sounds very interesting.

Dr HENRY — I can make this comment on that, and I know we are running out of time, like a lot of other universities Deakin is very metro-centric in the way it thinks about its course delivery. I make that point. Warrnambool is a campus that is dying. As you can see from Deakin's own submission it is subsidised internally

by the university. Deakin University needs to think of quite a different way of offering courses out from that campus, and we think Deakin at Your Doorstep is a model they could pursue.

The CHAIR — All right. Do Peter or Tony have some comments to make before we ask a couple of questions?

Mr McDONALD — While I am on South West LLEN, I am also the CEO of Otway Community College. We deal with a lot of the young people who have disengaged themselves from the standard school system. We run VCAL and VCE as well. We are dealing with a lot of the kids who are homeless, who have not been at school for a number of years and who are returning to school, who are finding even more disadvantage than those that are coming through the standard school system, because not only are they disengaged from school, in most cases they are disengaged from their families and also in some cases from the community as a whole. I think in some ways that determines how we address that group as well, because it is actually growing; it is not diminishing.

The CHAIR — It is certainly an issue that was raised yesterday at Hamilton as well.

Mr McDONALD — How we re-engage those young people and look at not only the pathway to post-compulsory but actually just the pathway back into education.

The CHAIR — Where does Otway Community College operate?

Mr McDONALD — We are based here in Colac. We have about 800 students.

The CHAIR — Are you a state-based school or are you an independent?

Mr McDONALD — No, we are actually an adult community education centre, but we are also a registered school.

The CHAIR — So you cover the similar model of Colac — an adult education centre that has taken on —

Mr McDONALD — A whole range of things.

The CHAIR — The challenge of young people.

Mr McDONALD — So I think that is another area of disadvantage that really needs to be considered in the overall post-compulsory education.

Ms HANCOCK — I think it also comes back to the idea of pathways — of how pathways can be understood and enhanced in the context of a rural and regional setting. Again, the LLEN also supports a community VCAL model. Currently, in this year we have managed to attract 32 young people in Warrnambool. Most of those young people have never been engaged in education. In fact there is one boy who never made the transition from primary school across into secondary; he is now 16 or 17. I guess what the LLENs and through these partnerships are showing is that these people can be re-engaged but the re-engagement programs are problematic in themselves because the way that we are able to — I do not know if you know about the funding model, but it is very — —

The CHAIR — I have been following that.

Mr DIXON — There is no model.

Ms HANCOCK — Invariably there is recognition amongst the educationalists that these are the young people who are the most costly and difficult to educate. But on the ground — and there are probably about 44 of these community VCAL-type re-engagement programs in Victoria, they are definitely less funded. Because of the funding model, they attract a lot less funding than a school does just by the nature of how they have grown. Again, looking at pathways, we have got a lot of work to do around aspirations.

The CHAIR — Yes, I noticed that in your report. John has a quick comment and then we might have some questions.

Dr HENRY — I would just like to make a comment on this notion of pathways and VCAL in the mix. We now have a much higher retention of young people through to year 12. A lot of these kids are going through a VCE that bores them witless. There are alternative pathways. One that is available is VCAL. VCAL can be a very exciting program, a high-quality learning program for a lot of these what I call sleepers — that is, kids just doing time through years 11 and 12 — and engage them in learning that is relevant to them. The universities, however, need to connect to VCAL as a quality learning pathway.

Deakin last year has put in a pathway from VCAL through to primary teacher education. We are now negotiating with six secondary schools in the Geelong region to build that pathway from 2009. This is something that universities could well do to increase the flow of young people into higher education. Even if they get moved from a VCAL into TAFE and then into higher education, those pathways should be encouraged.

The CHAIR — Your submissions have been very impressive and very thorough — the south-west one and your figures too, John, were very good. We are going to be looking that in a little more details this afternoon when we have a presentation from Deakin University.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Vince, what do you think accounts for the lower ENTER scores for students in regional Victoria? Do you think universities should allocate extra bonus ENTER marks for students in regional Victoria?

Mr CALLAGHAN — A lot of it has to do with pecking order.

Dr HENRY — I will comment tangentially. I have just finished a project for the Deakin School of Medicine, looking at selection practices for entering the medical degree. Deakin University got that school of medicine because they put their hand up for promoting rural medicine and getting young people coming through as doctors with a higher probability that on graduation they would become rural practitioners.

In that research they did for that project, around Australia quite a number of universities that are in the same game of trying to promote rural medicine put what they call a rurality — which is a word I only came across when I did this research — index, which is a score based on the time that young people have spent living in the country and recreational pursuits they might have that are rural oriented recreational pursuits and so on. So they get loaded up according to that index as against their other scores for entry.

Mr CALLAGHAN — South Australia does that already.

The CHAIR — I think we have got plenty to think about. You are wearing so many hats so have given us a great deal of information in the time you have spoken to us. Do you have any other comment you wanted to make, Toni?

Ms HANCOCK — No.

The CHAIR — That is terrific. Thank you for your presentations.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Just before you go: if we could deliver what you wanted, what would be the two things to get the various effects you want?

The CHAIR — Twelve things?

Mr KOTSIRAS — No, just two things. Let us look at the two things that you would look at to ensure there is a higher participation rate in regional Victoria.

Mr CALLAGHAN — I think a very simple and cost-effective thing to do would be to give out good information to parents about the cost of education and also the value of education, whether that be TAFE or universities. Again, as I mentioned before, I think for a lot of students who are going to university from regional areas and rural areas, they are the first in the family to do so. Even though it ought not to be that way, it is.

A lot of the information is going into the schools and the students are getting quite a lot of information from their careers teachers — I think sometimes it is inadequate. However, the parents are not getting the information. The workshops and the booklet concept I think is one which is simple, which is cost-effective and really valuable.

However, that is one thing, but there needs to be some pressure put on the federal government particularly to have a youth allowance and to look at it in respect particularly to regional students. If the case is that students are not going on to tertiary education and the cost is a disincentive, then it has to be looked at. It is a point that various research and committees and House of Reps and Senate inquiries have made over a period of 30 years — and I have only gone grey in the last couple of weeks over it — and really they keep on saying the same thing, and very little is being done about it.

Ms HANCOCK — The cost imperative is really the biggest strangle on making that transition.

The CHAIR — I see that you have suggested in your report, while the no. 1 route would be to re-look at the youth allowance, you have found some novel suggestions in terms of healthcare card provision or free student transport and so on for rural students as other ways of maybe assisting in that.

Mr CALLAGHAN — All those things are dependent upon your getting youth allowance. You cannot get rental assistance or a health care card, or scholarships for that matter.

The CHAIR — That is right. It is probably a central feature.

Ms HANCOCK — I guess the point is that it cost Vince's children \$35 000 a pop, but if he lived in Brunswick it would have cost what it costs you in year 12. That is the real issue. It is fairly obvious to us but addressing it is the real barrier.

Dr HENRY — Could I suggest just a practical development? It comes back to that Deakin at Your Doorstep idea. I think the universities should be encouraged to take the risk in the first instance and outreach their programs to communities where young people are coming through with reasonable ENTER scores but are then unable to leave their own community for financial reasons and also lifestyle reasons. They want to continue to play with the footy club or whatever. They have a relationship in the community. These are all important aspects of young people's lives. If we could run a community-based program in a number of degrees to these communities and get them involved in the next level of tertiary study, I think that would be a real breakthrough.

The CHAIR — I presume that these models require a mix of videoconferencing and written material?

Dr HENRY — We know how to do that. I am sorry we are running out of time. Deakin has already run these sorts of programs for specialist groups. We have been running them for 22 years for indigenous Australians, but they are supported by commonwealth money. What is important in these programs is to be able to bring the students on campus as a group for, say, one week or two weeks about five times a year. In the indigenous programs the students are funded for that and there is accommodation available for them. We have a model at Deakin that could be expanded into the rural areas of Victoria.

The CHAIR — It is certainly an issue that we would like to follow up some more, in terms of the success rate of those courses and so on, too.

Dr HENRY — They are very successful.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for that. We are looking forward to hearing from the youth council next. We certainly appreciate the contributions you have made.

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

Colac — 29 April 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

Ms A. Dunn, treasurer,

Mr T. Szmidel, vice-chairman, and

Ms J. Kettle, councillor, Colac Otway Youth Council; and

Cr C. Smith, mayor, Colac Otway Shire Council.

The CHAIR — Welcome. We were really pleased to have some young people speak to us yesterday while we were in Hamilton and again today it is terrific that you have come along. Obviously when we are hearing from a range of people it is important that we hear from people who are aspiring to have a university education or going through the education experience and looking at their options. We are certainly looking forward to the contributions you make. Thomas, it looks like you have the notes in front of you. Are you starting off and then passing on?

Mr SZMIDEL — My name is Thomas Szmidel. I am the vice-chairman of the Colac Otway Youth Council. These are also youth councillors. We are a group of secondary school students and a few mentors, as you can see back there. We get together every second Monday and discuss and take action on things relating to youth of today.

My key concern is that the number of secondary school students taking up positions at university is extremely low when compared to the number of students completing year 12 in the Colac Otway shire. I think this is caused by a number of things. I conducted a survey on youth council, which is made up with a majority of students. These students are representatives of each of the schools in the region and provide a general view of the students' attitudes and opinions. One hundred per cent of respondents agreed that the students from our region were less likely to go to university. The survey then looked into the possible reasons for why this is occurring.

My survey revealed that 70 per cent of respondents agreed that the students from our region leave school earlier. An equal number agreed that they also choose different post-school pathways — for example, TAFE, apprenticeships or employment straight out of year 12. Sixty per cent of respondents agreed that in our region we have fewer university campuses — I do not think we have any at all — and limited TAFE opening hours and courses. The survey also revealed that 50 per cent of respondents felt that other things, such as economic pressure and social or cultural issues, affected the number of students going to university.

This trend is supported by the On Track data for 2007. On Track is an organisation that surveys year 12s once they have left school. The data from this revealed that 77 per cent of students from our region did not go to university — they either took up other schooling or were looking for work — and 23 per cent of students did go to university. I personally think this is not a very good ratio at all. I feel these figures should be turned around and that 77 should be the percentage going to university. Also when I looked further into the On Track data I found that when you compare the number of students going to university with the distance the schools are located from university the enrolment increases. For example, when I compared Colac High School with Bundoora Secondary College, which is just near La Trobe University, a trend emerged. The On Track data showed that 20 per cent of year 12 graduates from Colac High enrolled at university and at Bundoora Secondary College 52 per cent enrolled at university. I think this is because of the proximity of the schools to the university. The mentality exists that university is more achievable because they see it every day — they know it is there — and friends and peers go to it. It is also a lot more economical because students would not have to travel far or they can just live at home.

I then asked in the survey what effect has going to university had on students and their families in the region. I got a lot of different answers. One of the main answers I got was about the cost. That is a big factor. A majority said that it was a real burden on the students' families and on the students themselves financially. If they wanted to support themselves while they were there, they had to work. Another answer I got was that it was too hard to relocate to be close to university — things such as the price of living on campus and the cost of renting a house and, if students were to travel, which happens a bit, the cost of that, which is quite high. A few people said that it was just plain more convenient to go to TAFE or to take up an apprenticeship.

The number of students going to university also has a negative effect on the region's economy. The number of people with skills in the workforce is dramatically lower here in the region because of the number of unskilled professionals. This in turn leads to there being not many skilled jobs in the region and causes many skilled people to leave to find work in bigger towns and cities and in turn to letting our region down and stopping it from developing further.

There are lots of things that can be done to fix the problem of not enough students going to university. A lot of the people I surveyed and talked to have said that to fix the problem we need to get a lot more students getting higher ENTER scores and gaining entry into universities. We can fix this in a number of ways. We can establish scholarships and grants specifically for this region and maybe somehow help students to find affordable housing or accommodation close to universities.

There are a few reasons why the number of students in this region going to university is low. I do not think there is enough awareness of the opportunities that going to university can bring. The other thing that a lot of people told me in person or in my survey was that the town would benefit from maybe having a university campus here or in the region, or at least a real TAFE with extended opening hours. The TAFE we have does not have long opening hours.

I was also told that opening a university in the region may be a little uneconomical until this region has a larger population, and that maybe until we have reached this population size we could establish an off-campus site in the region for online or distance learning so that students who do not want to leave or cannot afford it can still attend a university and do the courses and be with their families and community. So all up I do think where you live affects whether you go to university.

The CHAIR — Thanks, Thomas. Does either of you want to make a contribution or are you happy to answer questions?

Ms KETTLE — I do not have a speech, but I will make a comment.

The CHAIR — Yes.

Ms KETTLE — I want to do a double degree in law and psychology.

Mr KOTSIRAS — The two of you?

Ms KETTLE — There are four kids in my family — me and three boys. All the boys, even the eight-year-old, want to take up an apprenticeship because that is what my dad did, and I am the only one who wants to take up university. But even if they did want to take it up, my parents probably would not be able to afford it. I have had to start my own savings fund to get myself started, which is a bit of a burden on my social life.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Do you work?

Ms KETTLE — Yes, I do.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Part time?

Ms KETTLE — I work and I do groups like this and I am at school — I am in year 11 at the moment. I do not want to relocate; I want to stay in the community, and when I finish university I would like to come back here and work, but I do not see an opportunity for myself, because there are only three law firms in Colac.

Mr SZMIDEL — Two.

Ms KETTLE — And they never have job openings, and there is no real need for psychologists.

The CHAIR — They must be getting old, aren't they? They cannot last forever!

Mr KOTSIRAS — Is it easy to find a part-time job for students?

Ms KETTLE — Yes. It is pretty good. Some of them are just a tad lazy and do not look for it properly, but it is just a matter of dropping in résumés and stuff.

Mr SZMIDEL — There are a lot of openings at this time.

Ms KETTLE — Yes, especially with new stores opening in Colac — some of the major chains coming in, which is good. I could live in Geelong with my grandparents, but I do not want to be a burden on them and travel is such a pain. My friend's brother just finished year 12 last year, and he wanted to go to nursing school in Melbourne on the Waterfront. He did not get accepted because his ENTER was 2 points under the acceptance score. But he had all the prerequisites, and he had done extracurricular things that were necessary to get into it.

He went to a meeting at the Warrnambool campus and they said that they would accept him straightaway. It was simply because he was closer to it, and they thought it would be easier for him to get there. Because he was further away, he could not get to the school that he wanted to, and I do not think that is very fair.

The CHAIR — All right. Ashley, what is your story?

Ms DUNN — The same as Jenna: I would like to go to university once I finish year 12, but because I have always been younger in my year I will not have gained my P-plates by the time I leave year 12, so it will be very hard to travel by myself, especially if there is no-one else able to drive with me or take up the same course as me.

That is where commuting is really difficult. Because we live so close to some of the Geelong campuses, they have actually said that we are not allowed to board there — it was on the news recently — because we are close, but Geelong people are allowed. It is strange to me. I do not really get that. Boarding at a university would be hard. I have been raised in a single-parent family with just my mum and my brother, and that is basically all the family I have, so I would find living away from home for extended periods of time very hard. It would be good if we had a university or a TAFE with a good course in Colac to help out a bit.

Mr SZMIDEL — I also aspire to go to university to do business and IT.

The CHAIR — Are you looking at any particular university?

Mr SZMIDEL — Melbourne uni has an all-right course that I looked into, but I have not really selected anything. I am not quite set on what I want yet.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Your teachers are not here, so you can say what you want here, and you are protected by parliamentary privilege! Has the school prepared you and provided enough information to the students about courses and pathways? Do they offer assistance? Is there a careers person? Are they useful? If you want to succeed, is there any more assistance given?

Ms DUNN — Yes. At my school we do have a careers adviser, and there are certain days during the year where they give us a program of what universities offer, and they give us a chance to actually visit the universities and experience the courses for a limited amount of time so we get a feel for what university would be like and what courses are offered.

Currently there is a VCAL operation running at my school, where students are able to go up one day a week to either Deakin or different universities around Geelong. That has exposed a lot in our school about different opportunities that you are able to have. Especially through our careers adviser, we get all the programs of different opening days and a lot of information about the universities that we could attend.

Mr SZMIDEL — I am in year 9. We do a program called CLINKS, which is community links something-something-something — I cannot remember it. Every Monday we do the first few periods of school as normal, but then for the rest of the day in different classes we talk about futures and other stuff — a lot of universities and different courses and where you are going to go with your life. That is pretty big and is very good. We do four full periods. The Gordon TAFE has a campus. We went there and they showed us different courses, so that was pretty good. We do have a careers adviser, but as year 9s, we have not really seen much.

Ms KETTLE — We have a careers adviser, and I feel — and so do my friends, as last year we chose all of our VCE subjects — that we were sort of chucked into it. We have one day called Career Day, where you basically go on the internet and look at what you want to do and what the prerequisites are and write them down on a sheet, and that is all we did. That was a bit hard. I knew what I wanted to do, but a lot of my friends had no idea.

I am now finding that even I am doing all my prerequisites, it is the classes that I did not need that I am excelling in and the classes that I need that I am way back in because I have not looked into them enough and I had not been helped enough. My parents had to come into the school to find out what was going on, because I had no idea what I had to do. It was getting to the point where my friends are doing classes that they do not need and they are struggling in a lot.

I am doing two year 12 classes. One of them is not necessary — both of them are not necessary — but I need them for my ENTER, because I need a 96. I do not think I am going to be prepared by the time I get my ENTER to know exactly what I want to do and to be able to apply for university. I have never been to a university, apart from when I had something out of school. I went to Siemens science summer camp, which was at the university and which was good — not that I want to do science! I do not think they have prepared me well enough, and I do know what I

want to do, and there are lots of kids who are just fumbling around in classes that are useless, and they are not going to help them at all.

Mr SZMIDEL — The same here. We have got a lot of kids who have no idea — nothing at all.

Ms KETTLE — It is a lot of wasted time, because when they get to the end of year 12 and they realise what they want to do, they have nothing for it. They are not going to be able to do anything.

Mr KOTSIRAS — If you do not get into the course that you want, have you thought about going through another course which might lead you to the course that you eventually want to do? Have you investigated that?

The CHAIR — Options 2 and 3?

Ms KETTLE — I investigated my law course first off, and I picked a couple that I thought were okay, and then I investigated my psychology ones on its site. My thoughts were that if I cannot get into law, I can do psychology and criminal, and then I can go back and do law, but if I get into law and I cannot get into psychology, then I can always go back and then do the criminal one of that as well.

Mr KOTSIRAS — So your careers teacher has not sat down with you and said, ‘These are the options. These are the pathways. If you do not succeed, you might be able to go to this course, which might fit you into their course later on’?

Ms KETTLE — Nothing at all. We have basically had to choose our own things, and they just come around and say, ‘Yes, you can do that. You are capable of doing this’, and some of them are not even actual teachers.

Ms DUNN — For picking subjects at our school we have an information night where you can choose to go or not. Each teacher from a certain area that teaches it in VCE — say science or maths — you can actually go and speak to them and they will help you choose a course that will benefit you for the VCE. They also help you choose your VCE subjects and tell you the pathways which they can lead to and give you insight into the uni courses they did themselves. That is really helpful to us, because they actually give you information on what pathways it will lead to and how to go about finding a university and a course that you might want to do.

The CHAIR — In regard to gaining access to the youth allowance and so on, are you likely to consider deferring?

Ms KETTLE — I do not think I would have a choice, I would have to — just money wise and organising things. I do not want to because I would like to get a scholarship but if I do not, then I will not have a choice.

Mr DIXON — Would you prefer not to defer?

Ms KETTLE — I would prefer not to.

Mr SZMIDEL — Same here.

Ms DUNN — Because then you can go straight from school and you keep the routine of going to school every day.

Mr DIXON — Yet often young people who have got a choice deliberately take a year off. Finances are not always the issue.

Ms DUNN — I reckon if you defer and you do get a part-time job, you feel less inclined to actually go and complete your course if you feel comfortable in your surroundings then.

The CHAIR — I was keen to defer but I did not get the opportunity. I continued on, but I sometimes think if you go on and do some work and you find that the world of work that you get when you are not a graduate is not so great, then it gives you even greater enthusiasm to think, ‘I do not want to be doing this all my life. I want to go on to university and be able to get a better job’. There is a bit of a mix but we are interested in your views.

Mr KOTSIRAS — What happened to make you become an MP?

The CHAIR — Yes. Any other questions?

Ms KETTLE — Thank you very much.

Cr SMITH — Before you conclude I should explain that the youth council is made up of all the secondary schools across the shire and three of us are mentors on that youth council. They basically run their own meetings and conduct them in a very formal fashion. We are simply there to guide them in that deliberation of looking at anything across the shire dealing with young people. Our role is basically to sit in the background and give them a nudge and a bit of a hint from time to time, but we are certainly not teachers, we are simply there to create a push in the right direction.

Witnesses withdrew.

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EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE (SUB-COMMITTEE)

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

Colac — 29 April 2008

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Witnesses

Mr M. Holland, principal, Murray Street campus, Colac Secondary College,

Ms M. Pendergast, principal, Warrnambool College, and

Mrs J. Boyle, principal, Mortlake P-12 College, and

Mr S. Robertson, former student, Warrnambool College.

The CHAIR — Welcome to the principals group from the south–west region. It is terrific to have you to add your voices to those of the people we are meeting with while we are in Colac; also I welcome Shane Robertson, who is a student looking to go on to university next year.

MR HOLLAND — Thank you very much for providing time and thank you very much for the methodology of actually coming to a geographical area to get information first-hand, and we had good engagement on that over a cup of tea. Now I will try and get those points across, so I thank you.

We have contact with I think about 20 post-primary providers in the government sector in south–west Victoria, which is pretty well Colac through to the border, and so what we have done as a group of people is some work with our colleagues. The way that we have developed this is that each of us has done it in the form of an anecdote. In talking with Caitlin, it appears that you have more than enough access to statistics and everything else, so we have not done detailed statistical analyses based on our local areas but we are making references.

The document you have before you is the collation of our work, it is a bit of a summary. We had a bit of a get-together a while ago and basically decided to tell the stories of three very different communities which have very similar issues. So, for example, you have communities such as Warrnambool which is blessed with a range of secondary education providers. It also has a TAFE provider, a university and an ATC, and you can compare that to Mortlake, which has a very good P–12 college. Colac is caught between a whole range of things. We have neither a substantial TAFE provider in town, which is a huge disadvantage, nor access to tertiary education and travel. Nonetheless secondary schools are churning out very well-qualified students, and you met some of them this morning.

This document goes through each of those anecdotes, and towards the end I have taken the liberty of using some of the material that has come out of the education steering committee in the Colac Otway shire. In this community we are very blessed to have an excellent relationship with local government which is expressing a very strong commitment to education in a broader sense. For example, they are a major partner in the building of the new Colac Secondary College. I am trying to paint a picture here of three different communities at different levels. I commend to you a read of the material at the back.

I hand over to Mary from Warrnambool College.

Ms PENDERGAST — Thank you, Mark. In the document you have before you we outline that Warrnambool has three secondary colleges: Hawkesdale, Brauer College and Warrnambool College in our network, and our statistics — that you probably already have access to — are very similar.

One of the things I would point out is the shift in deferment rates from 2000 to 2007 as I have listed them in the document, and one of the issues we have is that in terms of the employment the kids are going to, much of it is to low-skilled employment and that is a real concern.

We are very well off in terms of industries based around Warrnambool. There is cultural behaviour by the industries where, if they see through the apprenticeship system, that there is a student in year 10 who shows potential, they pick them off, and so you have students who are probably quite strong academically but who also have real skills who we lose to industry either at the end of year 10 or mid year 11. You might have heard on the radio this morning that they are looking for 1000 workers for the blue gum industry up around Hamilton. About a month ago they flew 100 bricklayers from Newcastle down to Portland for the Alcoa development down there.

We have an issue in the Warrnambool district where they pick off about 60 apprentices a year that come out of our schools, which impacts on our retention rate, but then also on our university rate. There is a powerful industry base. We have Alcoa; we have Midfield Meats which is the biggest abattoir in the Southern Hemisphere; we have GlaxoSmithKline which is a good employer; and we have a big dairying industry down there. So at about 15 or 16 years of age kids begin to be targeted. This year our VCAL program started with 38 students but it has now dropped to about 29, and every one of those kids has gone on to an apprenticeship.

At the end of the day that is regarded as a great pathway in our area. The parents, many of whom are not tertiary educated, view the apprenticeship profile as a good way to go. They see it as long term, and longitudinal studies say they are still in employment at age 25 or 26 years.

The issues around our deferment rate for university are complex, and while cost is one issue, and a major issue — every student we have interviewed in the last month or so had that in the top two issues — coupled with the notion that they either were not ready to go; that they saw the notion of leaving the Warrnambool area as a rite of passage and that they would take some time to get ready to study again; that they were young; and they felt they were immature socially. They might have done very well academically but in fact they were not yet ready to go to the city, and that played a part in their decision.

I am what I consider as a ‘studentship girl’. I am now the principal of a college, but I went to Melbourne as a 16-year-old on a studentship. I had four years of education at Rusden, and went through the teaching milieu at a time when the people who are now working for me in that 48 to 53 years of age or more years age group had the same sort of structure.

They are intelligent, and they are competent. They went into an industry at the time it had starters, but they were very much supported into that industry through the studentship program which gave us a really strong pool of academic people in our industry. We are not getting that at the moment. I am not sure whether the other principals would concur, but we have some graduates who are great, but in the main I have a lot of people coming out of a Deakin program in Warrnambool at the moment who are trained from P–10 wanting a job but they are not the sort of people I can employ for VCE. One of the issues for me, as an employer, about having a university that does not have a secondary education profile is that I do not have who I need for physics, chemistry, specialist maths — the high-end courses.

One of the stories we have is of a woman who is a single mum on an income of \$78 000. She was mortgage-free prior to her son going to university. Her nephew left school in year 11 and went into a fitting and turning apprenticeship. He is now 24 and is about to buy his second house. He is on about \$95 000 to \$115 000 a year subcontracting around in major steel sheet making. Her eldest son studied anthropology. She has had to put him through all of his education because the child did not qualify for any of the support structures. She spent about \$60 000 putting him through.

Her second son suffers from depression. He started one course and passed the first year very well but failed the second year and has now started a second course. He now has all his HECS debt. Her third child decided not to go to university because she has witnessed the impact of that cost factor on the family. Her mortgage has gone up to about \$115 000, yet she was mortgage-free when her children started going through the university process.

Lots of parents say, ‘If my child does an apprenticeship, they will get around about \$12 000 to \$15 000 a year. It will cost me a round about \$15 000 a year plus about \$5000 for HECS. They are about \$100 000 worse off at the end of a university degree’. Why would you do it? There is a bit of a culture of that argument happening in our area at the moment where parents are saying, ‘We may as well get them into an apprenticeship and then we will not have those university costs’. It has been a powerful factor.

In the rest of the document you will see the other factors, but I will hand over to Shane to give his version of events. He was an alumni at Warrnambool College last year and has deferred this year.

Mr ROBERTSON — As Mary said, I studied year 12 and finished secondary school last year. I received an ENTER score of 96.15, which I was very impressed with — very surprised, too. I received my VTAC offer. My first round preference was to do a law international double degree at La Trobe University in Bundoora, but looking back now, deferral was always the way for me; it was always the way I was going to go no matter what offers I received through VTAC.

I think it comes down to three main reasons, which are not only reasons for me to defer but I think, from talking to my friends who also deferred and other people I know throughout the state, these are common trends for young people as to their reasons for deferral.

I am probably going to sound like a broken record but most obviously the first one is the cost associated with going to Melbourne, especially moving to Melbourne. We were talking earlier about the cost associated with renting. The housing market in Melbourne is obviously sky-high these days and for the vast majority of country families it is just not an option to either rent a house for their son or daughter or to buy a house, which we have done.

My family looked at doing that because my older brother is in Melbourne. When you look at not only one child but when you have more than one child as we have just read in the extract, we are talking about threefold costs.

University residence is anywhere between \$30 000 and up to \$20 000 just for accommodation to study. On top of that you are looking at HECS. I have calculated my HECS fee to be about \$35 000 just for the course. Obviously if I do post grad study I am looking at a lot more than that. That is starting off a long way behind my friends who have either deferred this year and will continue to work or who have taken up apprenticeships, like we spoke about earlier.

It is a long way to start behind, even with a qualification. I am very fortunate to have family in Melbourne; a lot of other kids do not have the option of staying with family members in Melbourne. It is a two-sided coin in the fact that it is great to stay with family who provide that emotional support which perhaps you do not have because you are based in the country, but then again on the other side of the coin you want that independence — you want to live the university life, you do not want to be detached from the university and from meeting new people and really immersing yourself in everything the university has to offer. That is something that kids struggle with.

It is something that my brother struggled with. He stayed with our grandparents in Melbourne for a year and found that a year was enough for him. Now he is renting, and his youth allowance just covers his rent. He has no spending money and no money for food or toiletries. He umpires football which gives him enough money to get by on, with food and whatnot.

Cost is probably the most prominent reason, but there are also two other main reasons. One of those is access to resources. From down here in the country Melbourne is a long way away; it is more than 3 hours on the train and it is probably a 3½ hour journey on any bus that the school organises throughout year 12. We are looking at 7 hours return just to go to Melbourne, which is a long time. In year 12, when time is very precious — there are SACS, there are exams, there are pressures with social activities, sporting activities and all of those things — to give up half of your weekend to travel to Melbourne to visit one university for an open day is a very large commitment.

There are monetary commitments with travel that city kids do not have to endure but that country kids do. That is something else, something very important where country kids are again possibly given the short straw compared to their city counterparts. As to access to resources there is also the fact that universities do not come out to country areas very much.

As an example, last year the four secondary schools in Warrnambool had one presentation by five universities, mostly based in Melbourne but one was in Adelaide, which was for 2 hours — and that was all we got for the year. If you live in Melbourne, obviously you have access to the universities. It is much easier to go in face to face and ask your questions than to ring up on a hotline that has been set up for you, be put on hold for half an hour and get swapped around to different departments and still not have your queries answered. That is another big reason why kids just do not know; they just cannot find out the information they need to know to the questions they have about university, such as, ‘What is it like?’ and, ‘How much will it cost?’ and, ‘Is this course right for me?’ or, ‘Where will it lead?’.

Earlier we were talking about the Warrnambool College career counsellor having been in his position for a long time, but he is only one person and he is dealing with year 10 kids who are looking at VCE as an option or possibly VCAL, with year 11 kids who are looking at continuing on to year 12 and choosing subjects or possibly joining the workforce, and with year 12 kids who are looking at university. He is dealing with something like 400 kids and he is only one person. There are very limited resources and time that he can offer kids out in country areas too.

The final reason that I see — and this is definitely true for me — is that perhaps more than their city counterparts, country kids are sometimes just not ready for uni. I think it is probably the saddest thing out of all these things that we are discussing that they are not ready for those two reasons above. They want to be ready but they simply cannot be ready, either for financial reasons because their parents just cannot afford to send them to uni, or because of the fact that they just do not know — they do not know whether university is for them, they do not know what it offers, because they try but they just cannot find out.

Simply just not being ready or not knowing what university offers is probably another reason why kids take that year to defer. It gives them a whole year to go to Melbourne, to travel, to talk to people in industry. It gives them time that they possibly did not have in year 12 to source out these answers to questions that they did not have answered in year 12 and in school. It allows them to get a greater view of the world and what they want to study. It is not the sort of thing — especially financially these days — you want to do, to end up with a degree, a \$35 000

HECS debt and think at the end of it, 'This is really not for me'. To take that year off is a great incentive for kids. Thank you.

Mrs BOYLE — I am the principal of Mortlake College. Mortlake is a small town west of Melbourne and north-east of Warrnambool, if you are not quite sure where it is. We are a very small college with 300 students P–12. That gives you some idea of the size. We are very similar to what other people have said.

However, we also have the other side of the coin in that we have a number of professionals who have moved into the town and travel to Melbourne for one or two days. They have made that decision and they live in Mortlake. That has had a direct effect. Out of a class of 22 at year 12, we have 5 Kwong Lee Dow scholarship holders. That is quite a substantial number. It is interesting how successful the students are.

I do not know if you are aware of the scholarship, but by getting it they have already been to Melbourne for a couple of sessions. They feel supported. They have been around the uni, they have been around the colleges. They will get into colleges without any problems, and I will speak about some of the problems with that. We have the two sides of that.

Also, because of the drought Mortlake is a declining township and we have cheap housing, so another element is being brought in that was not there before. We are now experiencing some of the problems that some of the other schools have faced. It would be fair to say that we are in a transition at the moment.

When I spoke to the students as a group there was no doubt that the five who have the scholarships will be financially looked after. Their parents are prepared to make the financial commitment, whatever it is. Four of those students will not even need to get part-time work; their parents will support them wholly and solely — they are lucky students. For the others, cost is a huge burden. Some of them spoke to me, too, about deferring. Our number of deferments is going up.

Qualifying for independent status and getting a job from Mortlake, as you can appreciate, is particularly difficult. We do not have a lot of industry in Mortlake, so the few scarce jobs that are available tend to be low-paying jobs. Those students needing to get independent status will have to move away from home. This is probably the first time that this has had to happen because of the drought. The drought severely impacts our town and the local neighbouring areas.

A lot of our students, until a number of years ago, could get part-time jobs on the farms. But the changing nature of agriculture is such that now most farms are moving towards not employing labour. Apart from those high-intensive industries such as dairying, which is not really around our area, farmers with mechanisation just will not have to employ the labour that they have had. A lot of those kids, unfortunately, will not get the jobs that they had been able to.

A lot of them, too, have some notion that they will be able to pay for the HECS fee as they go along so that they do not come out with that huge cost. Some of them I spoke to who are working in Melbourne are trying to pay their HECS as they go along so they do not have that hanging over, but it is not working. They cannot balance work and study. I have spoken to a couple of universities and they said that this is becoming an increasing problem with students who are trying to cover their debt as they go along.

I am talking about the flip side now, not the Kwong Lee Dow scholarship holders, because I really think they are set. I am talking about those other students whose parents have not partaken of tertiary education. It is similar to what Mary said — they can see that in other areas they can earn substantial incomes and are therefore not supportive of some of the students who would perhaps like to go on to university. That puts them behind the baseline for starters.

I will talk a little about getting into residential colleges at universities. Most of them charge a non-refundable fee to start with. That limits the numbers of universities that you will apply for because you know that whatever happens, you will not get that money back.

Most of the year 12s are fairly conscious of the costs to their parents. They couch it in a whole lot of other terms, but there is no doubt about it — cost is an overbearing factor. Also, those parents who have not applied for residential colleges are not savvy with the system that operates. I had a couple of parents whose children went to Melbourne uni. They said their children had attained high marks, they got into their course, they had applied for

residential college and they thought that they were home and hosed, they thought that they were in; so they got a huge shock when their children did not get into the residential college.

They also were not savvy on how you fill out the forms. There is a whole political system that operates, and I know this intimately as well although I do not know whether it operates at the other units, but in the colleges of residence with which I am familiar there is a knack to what you put down and how you put it down and then how the pool works and how you operate the pool, and knowing that the squeaky wheel is the one that gets oiled. So if your child does not get in, you do not sit back and wait.

On the other hand I think country people tend to think, 'Well, that is the system. I am being looked after'. It is not the system. You have to get down and hammer down doors and say, 'I want my child in this college'. That is the only way, in some cases, you will get them in. They are not savvy to that sort of knowledge.

The other thing is that some stories come back about students trying to get accommodation, and it is all very well to say that you do not get into residential college and you can go into a flat, but that is not easy. I know quite a few students who are couch hopping, which cannot be conducive to studies. If you are not familiar with the term, it means staying at a friend's place on their couch for a few weeks, and then when you wear out your welcome, you go to the next place, until you wear your welcome out there and so it goes on, and it is amazing how quickly those stories get back to the country.

One of the other things — and Mary actually touched on it — is that when country students go to Melbourne, they need support or a mentor system. City life generally is totally different from anything many of these students know. A lot of my students have not even visited Melbourne, so to suddenly go down there, or even to Geelong for tertiary study is a big thing. It is the first time they have been in Melbourne, and they do not even know how the public transport system works. They do not even know just the basics of living in the city.

As a former studentship holder, I had a matron who made sure we were in by a certain time and who made sure we were okay. There was this sort of overseeing influence and I really think that system worked very well to ensure success. I might say I do not want to just criticise the universities because we have found that Deakin and Melbourne universities have been excellent in making themselves available to us; whenever we have asked them to come up and speak to our students, they have been excellent, hence the number of scholarship holders that we have from Melbourne.

If I can touch on one more thing, Mary spoke about trying to get professionals to move into your area. I have a lot of trouble getting teachers to come to Mortlake College. The jobs go online, the recruitment is online and I put them online. I advertised a job at the end of last term. I had 11 applications and I thought that was fantastic, and then when I rang to make the appointment, I said, 'You do know we are in Mortlake?' and they said, 'Yes, it is just the other side of Geelong', and I pointed out that it was not quite just the other side of Geelong and that they should allow a bit more time than that to get there, and I ended up interviewing two who were already in the school.

This is impacting on what I can offer at year 12. In my specialist subjects of physics and chemistry I have fantastic staff, but they are ageing. They are fantastic — their age is not against them — but I am going to have trouble getting new staff up there to cater for those students coming through. That will be quite a problem. I concur with everything else that has been said but that is probably enough for now.

The CHAIR — We will move on to some questions.

Mr DIXON — I suppose Mary might be the best one to answer this question: once students have gone through the system and have obtained a degree, are they coming back or are they staying in Melbourne or Geelong or wherever they studied? Are they coming back home to work?

Ms PENDERGAST — I targeted three students who did their secondary education in Warrnambool; this year three of my four graduates are former Warrnambool students, so that has been a specific strategy that we have put in place. But at the moment Jane and I cannot get a science teacher. Our science teacher has just taken long-term sick leave and is going to retire on 15 December this year. I cannot replace him now. It is becoming an endemic problem, and one with which we are really under pressure.

We are really going to have to look at the way we are delivering in the network, to cater for some of the specialist subjects at the top end of the school. I have a boy who did physics and I have a girl who is teaching French, and

holding on to them will be the issue because the normal pathway for graduates is to teach for a little while, get their ongoing position, and then take some time off and travel. So that is another issue.

Mr DIXON — Yes, to go overseas.

Ms PENDERGAST — So that is another issue. It is a bit of a behavioural thing.

Mr HOLLAND — We have similar sorts of issues. Could I just amplify on a couple of things?

The CHAIR — Yes.

Mr HOLLAND — Just a few things, if I may, but I will not read this out. I will just draw a few things to your attention.

I have been a principal in three schools in south-west Victoria for nearly 20 years, and I have done quite a bit of work on this whole issue. I will just do something for the purpose of the evaluation and the statistics. If I can quickly give you a story because sometimes mindset is important so that we are all getting the same image. It is a World War II story.

The Lancaster bomber was very successful in the RAF. The RAF thought they could certainly do a lot towards improving their performance by making these aircraft more effective and resistant to anti-aircraft fire. So some bright flight attendant went up to the wing commander and said, 'Sir, what if we mapped out, on a model on the wall, all the holes that came back and then we could reinforce them, put armour plating on them and so forth?'

So they did this dutifully. Every bomber that came back was dutifully mapped and painted on the wall and all the rest of it was done. They were all set to go to the production line, and a very wise old pilot came along and said, 'Look, Old Man; you have got it wrong. They are the ones that came back!'

So it is how you look at that data because you are hearing all these sorts of stories. That takes me to the notion that there are hidden bits in this. Working on the 70-odd per cent of people that a teacher is able to contact is absolutely brilliant, but there is a hidden story to the 30-odd per cent we do not know about — and we just do not know about it.

It would be false to assume that that 30 per cent had the same population characteristics as the 70 per cent we have looked at. We need to find a way of getting into that. For example, 30 per cent is an interesting number. With due deference to your profession, I can get the excuse out into another level of government. Having sat around with other members of Parliament in a civil sort of event like this, there seemed to be a prevailing view that 30 per cent of people in universities was about right. And I had to say, 'When was the last time you looked at the OECD statistics to see where Australia lay in that list?'. We have got a way to go, particularly with the Asian tigers and their competition, so that needs to be picked up.

Thirty per cent is an interesting figure as well. If we have shortages in hospitality, builders and joiners, or hairdressing, previous government policy was to go and spend \$27 million in a town in various directions, providing an accredited training course.

But how does it work as a scheme in the current methodology, as reflected and learnt from that experience, if we take them on board? I would hope that as a result of the work of this survey — and it is not the first time I have sat and spoken to a lovely group of folks like yourselves — there is an outcome; because it is backing up in schools.

The sort of thing we are seeing right now is that it is great for me to stand here, and I can give a wonderful speech — as you are probably starting to gather — to bunches of kids, and inspire them and all of that sort of stuff, but the issue is they will say, 'Mr Holland, what happened to the kids last year? We have heard the story. Why do I put in the effort and energy? I can go and work at the local abattoirs and come back with money. I can go to Safeway', and that is what is happening. Kids are going into low-skilled areas. Initially it seems like riches to an 18-year-old, but where does it go?

My point here is: what are we doing? The 2020 Summit is saying we have to keep our community well educated, particularly in the bush. The point of the conversation just here is that it is a very sound point with our teachers, but it is not just teachers: you go to professions, trades and everything else — we need to enrich and keep them going and we need to ensure that we are growing our own, and this is a method of achieving it.

I have made reference in here beyond just the university sector to the TAFE sector because of the articulations that are occurring with all of those things. I reckon that is vitally important. I would put a plea in once again. I had this conversation with Caitlin very pointedly before. Give her a lot of support, as she is the only person doing this, with Jennifer's permission. There is a lot of work in this, despite our other comments. I would say there is a lot of work to go into this. But the area that you actually coalesce the data from is important. For example, Colac Otway gets lumbered into the Geelong bucket. If you put that together, you get a different picture. What are the skills shortages in the five shires in the G21 area? You will come out with a lovely list, but it will not be relevant to here to providing education training to meet those needs. It will not work. You really need to map very carefully what is a sensible geographical area and make reference to that.

I am fairly critical in some way of universities, being a secondary school principal of many years. You would be familiar that the accountability mechanisms we have to go through are enormous. That does not mean there are not any, but I am not aware that the same sort of glare of public accountability is put on universities. I would like to see: what is the retention rate of an arts degree at Melbourne University; what is the demographic breakdown; where are they coming from? I think there is a whole need to have a look at that so that government and public policy can be informed as to where it heads. I think that is vitally important.

There are a couple of other things. I will just add a couple of rural stories as I have done on my page there. It is worthwhile bearing in mind in a place like Colac we have a neighbourhood renewal area. Forty per cent of the population of Colac Otway shire — has the shire presented this stuff to you this morning?

The CHAIR — Briefly, yes.

Mr HOLLAND — Okay, so you have got all that picture. On the one hand you have people whose families are oriented towards university and further education, and others to whom achieving year 12 is a major, major thing for that family. Even just getting through can be a struggle, but then again for a talented person going on somewhere else— and let us not make the mistake that people in neighbourhood renewal areas are not talented; we can quote those ad nauseam across our communities. Unless the doors are opened broadly for all the population, there is a social equity thing there that needs to happen. We are doing our bit at a local level. We need the next level of policy to open up doors. I think there needs to be a strategy of positive intervention just in the same way as we are saying there are not enough builders, joiners and hairdressers. What are the on-the-ground things that can actually happen through schools and neighbourhoods? I have had a go at putting about 13 things for you to have a look at. They may not be the PhD version of solving this problem, but I think it is a conversation that needs to start through stakeholders regionally and amongst our contacts.

The CHAIR — Thanks, Michael. Are there any other questions?

Mr KOTSIRAS — What are the schools doing to provide students with information of different career paths, pathways to TAFE to universities? What are you doing?

Mrs BOYLE — We have an extensive Managed Individual Pathways program. Both the staff in the school and I actually employ an ex-teacher to come in and just spend probably a couple of hours with the children to manage their pathways and to have a look at VCAL. We spend a lot of time on it and look at different options. Therein lies the problem. We cannot really access the ATC in Warrnambool because once again distance is a problem. As I have said in there, there is a promise of a bus, but those parents and I are a little bit cynical about that because often those carrots are put out and then the funding is pulled. Then where are you left? You have got a child who is halfway through an apprenticeship or some sort of TAFE program.

Ms PENDERGAST — I think one of the issues at the moment, though, is the labyrinth that kids enter when they are finishing year 9. Now with VCAL coming in, with VET programs available, with VCE as an option, with SBNA's out there, with structured workplace learning out there, the parents and the kids are bombarded with information about the possibility of pathways. You put a 14 or 15-year-old child into the chair when those sorts of things are being proffered and the complexity of it is incredibly difficult. We have 38 per cent of our kids on EMA, which means that they are in some sort of circumstance that requires support already.

Last year I was the first-year principal at Warrnambool College. I stood there at the parents night that they had, I looked up at the information and I thought, 'How on earth are these families going to know what course to take?'. Basically what we have been saying for years to kids is to keep your options open for as long as you can. Now we have got this pathway process within primary school, where there is a plethora of options. As Shane indicated

before, we are considered to have a reasonable careers program, but the kids are not informed because the notion of getting deep information about a whole range of things is impossible with the constraints of what is happening.

The best thing that could happen to us is that universities have an entrance exam. We take away the whole VCE focus on university, have time within the program to prepare kids for those pathways and have this issue taken out where all you are doing is trying to get an ENTER score in terms of that desperation. Our retention rate is appalling, if you look at what the state government is asking to do, but our long-term data is okay because a lot of the kids are going into apprenticeships. We are in this tension where we are supposed to be getting our retention rates up, but the community itself is reasonably happy with where the kids are going. It is quite difficult.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Shane, how did you find the information that the school provided you in terms of pathways?

Mr ROBERTSON — It was good for what they offered, yes.

Ms PENDERGAST — Not enough.

Mr ROBERTSON — But I guess, like Mary just said, it is not enough. There is only one gentleman for something like 400 kids. In year 12 part of the program was that you would meet with this careers counsellor. It was a group of four year 12 students for 15 minutes. I missed my appointment because I was at another meeting, and that was it for me. There is only so much time that he can offer. He is also a teacher; he is not just a careers counsellor. Like I mentioned in my presentation, the fact that the universities came down for one 2-hour lecture and that is all we got of the year, it is difficult. It is difficult to go to Melbourne and source the information.

Ms PENDERGAST — They spend a fair bit of time in year 10 commerce where they go through job applications and all that sort of stuff, but it is actually not focused necessarily on specific career preparation. We are looking at the Tasmanian model that is out there at the moment where you start at year 7 and you work through from year 7. We are piloting a unit in year 9 this year, but I still do not think that is the answer. I just think it is the dearth of information about the broad range of courses and the ability earlier — and everything is getting earlier and earlier — to delineate skills and attributes or capacities and go off into a particular direction. When I left school, it was either nursing or teaching. My mother was education mad. I have six siblings, all of whom are teachers except one who is a farmer. We were pushed into that milieu, if you like, whereas now we certainly do not have that happening. People are valuing the trade sector much more powerfully.

Mr HOLLAND — I was going to suggest you ask that question every time you sit down with a bunch of folks, particularly people who are going through the process or have just gone through it, ‘At what stage did you actually make up your mind what you wanted to do?’. Shane and I had this conversation just having a coffee. Although there was a pathway, it is not necessarily the destination. It is a different sort of understanding that we may have had in our realms and development.

The other trend that I believe is occurring — and it is good and bad — is that we have, through organisations like the South West LLEN, the local community partnerships and all of those sorts of things — and I can only speak for Colac Otway, because I know how it works — a very effective way of connecting us to a whole range of trades and all that sort of thing and employers. It works very well. But what I think is happening in the minds of some kids — and I have not done any research on this — it would appear is that a greater number of kids are looking for employment locally that may not be sustaining in terms of further learning, because it is easy and because it is local. So we have got a good group training company who comes into the school and chats to the kids, they fix them up with Bob the builder down the road or whoever, and it is done. All of a sudden the statistics, say, for Colac High School were on the front page of the *Sun* last year, much to my amazement, for a good reason — that was, the percentage of people who got apprenticeships and traineeships — whereas previously Colac High School would have been in there for large number of people going to university. That was our stock in trade. I am not saying that is a bad thing, but I wonder if there is something else happening.

Ms PENDERGAST — I think also those kids are targeted who are not enjoying school. Kids are targeted for apprenticeships who are disengaged from school. We not talking about the Shanes of this world for that process. We are actually talking about another different demographic.

Mr HOLLAND — I have made reference to that sort of process, particularly where there are contracts awarded on a per capita basis. So I can go and say to Shane, ‘I represent such-and-such group training company’, convince him to go and work for somebody. That is great. I get a per capita for the privilege.

There is nobody really looking at the contracts for my business to make sure I am doing it in an ethical way, or the registered training organisation I sign them up with does a good job, and it is down to principals and schools to sort that out, so there is a whole field there as well.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much. We are not making a very good job of keeping to time today, but of course you had so much information to offer about school experiences, and having Shane here was very helpful.

Mr HOLLAND — I am sure we would all be happy to broker any further questions you may have.

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

Colac — 29 April 2008

Members of the Sub-Committee

Mr M. Dixon

Mr G. Howard

Mr N. Elasmir

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 L. Bartlett, regional youth affairs consultant, Barwon Adolescent Task Force.

The CHAIR — We are about to hear from Barwon Adolescent Task Force. I thank Leigh Bartlett for coming along. We are certainly looking forward to your contribution.

Ms BARTLETT — I will just tell you a little bit about what the Barwon Adolescent Task Force is. The task force was set up about 28 years ago in response to issues around young people and the fact that everybody was going it alone and doing their own thing. It became an alliance — or I suppose we look at it as being like Switzerland — where the youth sector comes together but nobody owns it and everyone can talk together. It is unique because there are no MOUs, terms of reference or things like that. There are issues and everybody works on them together, and it has actually worked quite successfully. What is interesting is that a lot of the models are now going back to that. Through a network, gaps, strengths and things come up and everybody works on them together. I suppose when we find out about something like this we take it to the network meetings, which is anywhere between 40 and 60 people, and we say, ‘What does everybody think? Let’s put it in a pool’. I can then bring it to you guys which saves everybody coming independently.

We work across schools, youth agencies and young people across the five local government areas of Queenscliffe borough, Golden Plains shire, Colac Otway shire, the City of Grater Geelong and the Surf Coast shire. There are some regional and coastal areas in there, and they have all got their own unique issues, but they all share a lot of similarities too.

I suppose the other way I come to you is as a mother of five who is potentially looking at sending five kids to university in seven years on a SACS award. As you can see it is really important that you guys get this right or I am going to keep coming back year after year. I also come as somebody who has taught and worked in education, student welfare, and with careers in Mirboo North, Traralgon and Bellarine, so I have a fair grip on what is going on in educational settings in rural and regional areas.

I suppose taking over this role has been really important for me because we do not just look at education or homelessness; we look across the pillars. One of the things we notice is that up until recently when we talk about young people accessing education and things like that, it was nearly always siloed into looking at the academic needs of young people. Nine times out of 10 if there is a breakdown it is a social and emotional breakdown, and I suppose that is what BATForce can bring to this. We are the services that work around the schools which actually support young people to stay in education at those very vulnerable, at-risk times. BATForce works across the continuum from kids who are well connected to young people who are disconnected from very early on.

You guys have dealt with all the data and all of that stuff today; I am not going to do that because it bores me just as much as it probably bores some of you. For us what we see here is they clearly become disconnected or start becoming at risk of not attending tertiary education. We start looking at the whole picture, not just the academic needs of the young people. Leaving home is a huge thing. I was a young person from the bush, too, and I know what it was like. Focusing purely on the academic needs is not going to cut it. I listened to a couple of these people today, and I work with these people on a regular basis. The need for independent living skills does not just happen as you walk out the door. That needs to be taught really early on; it is not just something that happens as soon as a young person finishes their education. It is highly likely those young people with ENTER scores of around 97 have been really well supported at home. These are the people who will struggle when they get to Melbourne and to other places to study.

We talk about youth commitments and we are very much on, in Victoria, about youth commitments at the moment through education. What we want to do is use this as a bit of a litmus test to challenge the youth commitment that is just not in schools and that plays across everybody’s part of life. When a young person leaves school to go to Melbourne they do not just leave their community; they leave their connectedness through their sporting clubs, the work they are doing at home and the social and emotional support when they move away. We need to be wrapping services and support around the whole of a young person’s life, not just around that entry point into education. That can be things through such as whose responsibility is it to say, ‘Okay, if I’m playing footy in Camperdown I have to leave that environment, which is where all my social and emotional support is’? We know one in four young people has issues around mental health. Those connections are the things that make a really significant difference when they get to Melbourne. They are taken away from those critical supports around their sport and social commitment. How do we go about then nurturing that and saying, ‘Okay, when you get to Melbourne here are the opportunities’.

I suppose the other thing that comes into play there is this: obviously everyone has touched on the youth allowance and Austudy not being at a level that is supportive now with affordable living. Those people often do not get back into sport when they get to Melbourne because they are out doing part-time work to subsidise the bits that they are missing out on. They are also missing out on that social connection once they get to where they are going. Given a choice of going back to what you know or staying there, that is really significant. So when we talk about transition we talk about a whole of a young person's life transition, not just education. I suppose that is what we get reports of and that is what we see. So social and emotional support is really important as is losing connections with the local community through quitting local sport and community groups.

The other really important impact that young people have in their community is the role that they play. Who fills that void when they leave? If you are a young person who has to work on the farm and things like that and who then has to move away from that, families have to pay to bring that labour in. That can have a really significant impact on a family. What level of support is there for families when a young person goes away and they have to start buying in skills on the farm, skills in the family business that they have not necessarily had before? That is a fairly significant impact for families.

I suppose one of the things we have not done well around the service sector is including the family as part of the stakeholder group. We can sit and tell young people, and I heard you ask the young fellow before how he found out about pathways and careers. The reality is that the teaching staff have the students only five days a week from 9.00 a.m. until 3.00 p.m. The family's educational needs are really critical around this, too. We are only just starting to see it now. The best communication tool for parents is still a long way away. Very rarely in country areas do you get the uptake at parent teacher night that that you do in city schools. I have sat in schools in Mirboo North and Traralgon with no-one coming to my desk, whereas at Prahran high there was a flood. Often there are people with big distances to get to, there are other things that happen after hours — it is just not there. So how are we getting information out to parents, not just the young people?

I suppose I am trying to come at it at a slightly different angle from what you have probably heard about today. That is really important. We have got all these parents out there who do not know about these career opportunities because they have grown up in these smaller communities. How are they getting that information? The best communication tool we have got across Australia is our media, yet we still do not have enough control over what we use our media for in these instances. Country people read newspapers — that is what they do, and that is how they connect with their community. We have such a good opportunity to feed information in through careers and what young people are doing well, and yet we constantly hear negative stuff about young people in the paper and we do not hear the good media stuff.

I sat at a LLEN meeting talking about manufacturing a few months ago, just after Ford had closed its doors to 1200 workers, and they were saying, 'We need to go out and talk to parents about how great manufacturing is'. I thought, 'With a front page like that, are you serious?'. It just gets a bit frustrating.

You know the big bang questions — transport is a huge issue. We have kids in Lethbridge where one bus a week goes to Geelong. They are only 25 minutes from Geelong; they are not even isolated although you could say they were, they are just as isolated as young people in Colac. One bus a week is not helpful to the young people in those communities.

I have been going to meetings about transport for 15 years — and I am still not seeing solutions there for young people. The bus timetable in Bellarine has not changed since I went to university. My kids are faced with an 80 minute trip into Geelong from Torquay. It is a 15 minute car trip, but it takes 80 minutes on a bus. Two of my kids will not be going to secondary school in Geelong because they suffer from travel sickness. It is the length of time, the buses are having to stop so many times because the bus routes are just so blocked up.

We need to seriously look at transport issues. There is no secondary school in the entire Golden Plains shire. You have got basic stuff about 'lines in the sand', that it is a Grampians region secondary education setting, yet all of the young people at the southern end of the shire access schools in Geelong. The services do not even match up. The young people have to access services in Ballarat for some of the services, yet they go to school in Geelong.

This sort of support lacks a level of sensibility. We are talking about boundaries around regions which are not sensible for the young people. We talk about youth commitments — that is where they start: a level of sensibility around support networks. The School Focused Youth Service is a fantastic program in our state. I think it fills a

great gap. The young people in Bannockburn who are 15 minutes from Geelong have to go to Ballarat to access the service. I am sick of sitting in meetings and saying, 'That's just dumb', because at the end of the day it is not healthy for those young people. We want to keep them in school so they have an opportunity to go on to tertiary. We are not even supporting them at that end.

The other thing when we talk about transition support is I come back to the fact that traditionally we talk about academic support. In the schools — and I listened to the teachers who were sitting here before — the commitment to specialist subjects like careers and student wellbeing — I was at a school with 780 students and I had a 0.5 position for student wellbeing. With 780 students, that was a lot of recesses and lunches that I missed out on. Because they all have to get on the bus when school is finished you do not have that contact time with them.

There could be a serious review, especially in rural schools, of what level of commitment is given to subjects like careers and student wellbeing, the 1 and 2 per centers who actually help those students get through to a position where they can go on to tertiary education.

I suppose the other thing is not to just look at the doom and gloom side of things. There are a lot of really positive things happening in Victoria at the moment. Colac is certainly one of them. Colac has applied for some funding from us to run an applied learning program through the year 9s. They have had to apply to a community based organisation to try to get some funding to run an applied learning program. What we know in the country is that if young people understand their communities and they have a connection with their communities, they can start to plan for employment opportunities that actually fit.

Applied learning opportunities around year 9 and year 10 are a really positive way of doing this. They can base their curriculum on what is happening out in their local community and see whether they fit. They do not have to wait until they leave school to do that. Subjects like VCAL and VET subjects allow us to start doing this. But to really seriously commit to young people connecting with the community at that level is a really good start. They are expensive to do, but if done well, they probably save money down the track. That is the sort of youth commitment that I suppose I am expecting out of this with more communities — and parts of Gippsland will be the same. We need to start looking at those applied learning opportunities.

I get concerned, and I think somebody pointed it out just before, that in the skills shortage areas they look at the vulnerable students and say, 'You are not enjoying school, how about doing a trade?'. I have sat in meetings and listened to people say this. Schools are where young people go to become good citizens. I get really frightened when I hear people say that at about grades 5 and 6 we need to start talking about career outcomes. I am not sure about the committee, but in year 9 I was not really sure where I was going. I think being a good citizen is really important. That connection through applied learning in their own communities through some of their subjects will allow them to naturally decide where they want to go with that.

Nursing was a classic. When I went through in the 80s, half went into nursing in hospitals and half went into nursing in universities. My friends who went into nursing in the hospitals are still nurses. None of my friends who went into the university pathway through the universities is still in that career. Applied learning is a critical pathway.

Another group of young people that I want to highlight is young people with high-support needs. We have talked about integrated education models for a long time. Some have worked, some have not and that is okay; we are not going to learn unless we put them out there. There are a lot of young people out there through independent living who are living with mental health and physical health issues who would probably do really well at tertiary.

If you start adding in having to move away from home for those young people and the lack of support, you are just setting young people up to fail. I suppose looking at what works in our community around transition support in other parts of our lives, around young people moving out of home, of independent living and things like that, having a transition support worker has really helped fill those gaps. I think there are probably opportunities to look at this for young people from the bush going to universities.

I know that at Burwood — what is it called now? The universities keep changing names on me! — a friend's kids went down there and said, 'It is great. We have got this new managed housing now', where they go in and pay money towards their broadband and their rent. All of those things are actually paid for, so there is that support, whereas probably half a generation ago we did not have that. If you did not get in a resi, you had to work out the private rental system by yourself. Those levels of transition supports work, and they need to be built on.

I suppose that is where I come to my final part, because I know you have heard all of this today — that is, we need to stop looking just at deficit data, about what is not working. In the youth sector we have always based our decisions on deficit data, that 30 per cent of these people are not connected, one in four people has a mental illness. There is a whole heap of young people who are going to university from the bush who are doing it well. They are the ones we need to be studying and looking at what are the resilience factors that those young people are bringing to the table which are connecting them.

The young people themselves will tell you. Origin have just done a great survey in Melbourne around young people with mental health who have managed to stay connected. It is just an exact flip side of what we know from deficit data. Young people who are connected in their communities, who still have connections with home, who are doing the activities they want to do because they have been predisposed to what they are going to achieve are far more likely to be successful.

I think we need to start looking at not always studying the deficit data, but really looking at young people who are well connected and how that has worked, because we have spent years doing the deficit model and it is not working. We know what the qualities are that make young people resilient, and we know what the qualities are that make young people who are connected. If we going to truly have a youth commitment that works, we need to start working from both ends of the scale and not just from the deficit model. That is pretty much it.

The CHAIR — Thanks, Leigh. We have heard that our students in regional Victoria have less aspirations than children in the cities. Can you think of any programs or initiatives that should be put in place to lift the aspiration of students and parents as well?

Ms BARTLETT — I do not think their aspirations are less; I just do not think they have the language yet to describe it because of their lack of experience. Any group of young people who are not exposed to information just do not have the language yet. I think that is what it is about: it is about giving them the language and the experience, and that is about getting some travelling roadshows out to the schools so they do not have to spend 12 hours getting into Melbourne. I know of those days that you had to take off work to take young people down through school holidays to open days because their parents could not. That is the extra added balance.

Young people have amazing access to the internet, and we do not use it to the advantage. How much time is being spent in the classrooms? Do regional areas get a little bit of extra credit for actually having us spend some time teaching independent living skills and spending some time adding that stuff into the curriculum? It can be cross-curricular — looking at university courses, looking at independent living, looking at your aspirations and developing the language around, ‘What do we do after school?’. I think it is just about being a little bit more creative with the curriculum and adding that stuff in in areas where they do not naturally have it.

Mr KOTSIRAS — So schools have a greater role to play?

Ms BARTLETT — Yes. I think it is about acknowledging that schools do not like anything that is imposed on them. Having worked in schools and now being that person who tries to impose stuff on them, they do not like things that are imposed on them.

It is about showing them ways that they can teach it or have it cross-curricular which can be embedded in a curriculum without adding on top of it. There is no reason why basic year 9 and 10 maths subjects cannot have information around independent living in it and be used as a learning opportunity, but also going across the social and emotional scale and not just the academic. I think there are opportunities there that have not been properly picked up on.

Mr DIXON — Of young men and young women, who is more motivated to pursue further education in this region?

Ms BARTLETT — I think it depends on where you are. I was in central Gippsland when Jeff Kennett did a fantastic job with the SEC. Once that was privatised, we had a whole group of young men who had career opportunities and who knew what they were going to do, and all of a sudden a third generation — I was going to do what everyone else did — was taken away from them. We had a group that rebelled and gave up pretty quick, whereas the girls actually said, ‘Hang on a minute! What are the other opportunities in this?’.

I am frightened we are going to see that with Ford, to be honest, in Geelong, especially with people out in the north. I know they are not as rurally isolated as the Colac people, but when you take the fact that a lot of those young people do not have access to cars or transport, they are just as isolated.

There are a lot more career pathways at that low level for men out in rural areas than there are for women, so it is about creating that language. But it is also about being sensible. If you want to go to TAFE in Colac, hairdressing is not for everyone, so having some other tasters or some other short-term stuff that can actually — —

That is another way. The short-term TAFE tasters are really good opportunities. What is to say that a year 10 class cannot have a few of those TAFE tasters put in there as units to be studied to learn what you want to do.

The CHAIR — I am interested to see whether you have looked at another thing. You were talking about the need for support for kids who have to leave home to go to university. I do not know whether you have looked at any programs that are being offered by universities or programs that are trying to support country kids who come to their universities. Are you aware of anything that has been put in place that might be working?

Ms BARTLETT — To be honest, I have only had a really quick look. Just from speaking with friends who are a step ahead of me on this, I suppose the supported accommodation seems to be improving out of sight. There are still a number of young people who, if they miss out on resi, give up. That is a bit of a scary thing.

I suppose one of the other parts that has really broken down is the lack of union stuff in universities has really decreased those social support opportunities for country kids that probably they had a generation ago. There are some programs that are doing well that we have seen. I am probably looking at programs that are in other parts of young people's lives that could be built on, because there is a similar level of transition support.

There are programs like Read the Play, which they run through the sports clubs here, which look at mental health issues. It is about saying, 'If a young person leaves your sports club, who is responsible for checking that they have turned up on somebody else's doorstep?'. That stuff is really critical to connectedness — programs like that. How can we adapt that to use it in regional areas to see, when they get to university, how they are connecting to those other parts of university life or TAFE life and not just the academic.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Leigh.

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

Colac — 29 April 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

Witnesses

Mr A. Lane, student and residential assistant,

Mr J. Devereaux, director, student life division, and

Mr J. Temple, manager, Personal Support & Residences, Deakin University .

The CHAIR — I welcome witnesses from Deakin University Residences. Thank you for coming along to our hearing in Colac. You are obviously aware that we are looking at issues of young people going to universities, so obviously we are very interested to hear what you say, and it flows on nicely from some of the earlier groups that we have heard from today.

Mr DEVEREAUX — Thank you. I will not say too much because John and Aaron are heavily involved in the day-to-day operations and will be able to give you much more insight into how we operate our student residences. But I would like to refer to the university's formal submission to the inquiry.

We are very pleased to add some further detail to it, particularly in respect of residential accommodation. I was going to summarise some of the key points in that submission, which really reflect on the university's very real commitment to rural and regional communities, but I think it says it all in the submission, and it is quite succinct, so we will get straight on to accommodation matters.

You may be aware that Deakin University owns and operates accommodation on three campuses. We have 447 places at Waurn Ponds, 240 places at Warrnambool and 200 places at Burwood. Our on-campus accommodation is managed and operated by university staff, and I make that point for a reason, and we operate it under the philosophy that it is a living and learning environment. It is not just a place to live and eat.

Off-campus accommodation support is provided predominantly by our Deakin University student association, which is an independent incorporated association, but we work in partnership with that association. The service provided by the Student Association is for both domestic and international students however the university does fund the association to provide a higher level of service for international students in particular. With the exception of funding provided by the University for the delivery of specified services for international students, the service by the association is self-funded, and there are some significant concerns about the capacity to continue with that service due to the impact of the VSU (voluntary student unionism) legislation. But that is enough from me. John and Aaron will be very pleased to talk to you about the details of how we operate, the accommodation and some of the issues that we confront with the students.

Mr TEMPLE — Thank you for the opportunity of presenting. I know there are some questions that the committee wants to put because they are in the letter that I received, so I will probably talk to some of those. As John indicated, when you bundle the numbers of all three campuses together, it is about 893 students, so it is close to 900 residential places across the three campuses, with half of those actually at the Waurn Ponds Geelong campus.

In terms of application demand, there is always a high demand, particularly if you have a look at the Burwood campus where we have the least number of beds but the highest demand. I guess annually there is a growth rate of about 3 or 4 per cent demand across the three campuses and, as John indicated, we try to provide in residential services a living and learning environment. It sounds a bit jargon-ish, but what it is in real terms is not only a place to reside where you have proximity to teaching and learning facilities and access to libraries and all those sorts of things, but the other very important part to that is that it is actually a living environment where you actually are there with a residential community.

That is a major component about what we do — if you have a look at our structure in terms of residential services, I am responsible for the personal support and the residences, so part of my portfolio is for those 900 places, but I am also responsible for student loans and counselling and chaplaincy; so it is a nice portfolio of complementary services.

But the other thing about residences is that we have a structure whereby we have residential managers who live on site, we have residential supervisors who also live on site, and then we have residential assistants as well, and Aaron is a third-year law commerce student, and we are grateful that he was able to come today.

He is a residential assistant, so I will let Aaron talk about those sorts of things. We do pride ourselves on the provision of a living environment that is actually supportive to students. When students come into university for the first year it is a big step in their lives, and 90 per cent of our students come from Victoria. As John has indicated, the focus of the university is about rural and regional students.

When they do come in it is a big step — the first time away from home for many of them. For many of them, particularly on the Warrnambool campus and the Geelong campus, they are the first person within their family to

have actually attended university. So we have programs such as education programs about responsible consumption of alcohol — a big thing! — but that is a compulsory session for all first-year students, and then the other years as well. It is about living programs such as socialisation programs. Residential assistants are responsible for about 20 students. They actually live within the particular unit, so there are weekly meetings. It is enabling, I guess, a successful transition. Living away from home is about feeling comfortable and feeling mutually supported.

A program that we will also put in place that has been in the developmental stage is academic mentoring. That is part of the learning stuff as well. We are able to assist them in that transition, and I guess part of that is, with their learning program, we actually have academic mentors — fellow students and residential supervisors — who assist them with their faculties. If you are doing a first-year commerce subject or something like that, then we actually group people together so that they can do some of that mutual support work in terms of their subject matter.

I guess we see it as a fairly holistic approach. Many of the students stay not only for first-year but second year and third year, and what we tend to do is that, if you have a look at our students cohort, we have a mix of not only domestic students but international students, but probably the ratio of female to male is about 60-40, so 60 per cent at least are females, and that is about feeling secure within a particular environment, if it is a first time away from home, and we do focus more on, I guess, new student entry.

So there is probably a ratio of about 55 per cent new students and about 45 per cent are about keeping that continuity, that sense of culture and history for returning students. That is an important path. The university works very hard on student recruitment, but it is also about student support and retaining students as they go into their first, second, third or fourth years, and then of course the other end is, if you do that successfully, you have successful graduate outcomes. So it is that transition by the university, and residential assistance is obviously an important part of that throughout that entire continuum — supporting students throughout that whole-of-university experience.

On that note I would like to hand over to Aaron. I will just explain the role of an RA (residential assistant). Obviously they are paid by us. We actually have paid employment so as the previous speaker indicated, that is an important part of students coming in and actually feeling worthwhile but also getting paid for their time. It is paid employment.

Their role is that sort of one-to-one support of particular students within their unit. If they have personal issues about transition, then they are there on site to assist them in that transition acclimatisation into university. If there are bigger issues, then through the Division of Student Life — counselling, health services — they are able to refer them on to those other university services as well. But I will let Aaron speak for himself.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Aaron, I am dying to find out whether the alcohol consumption has worked, in terms of the course, to limit you drinking alcohol?

Mr LANE — It has worked on me. I cannot speak for everybody; but it does work and it is one of the great programs of the Res program. We often have meetings such as that, and sessions with members of the community, like the police and other services, who come in to give talks on that because it is very important for people moving out of home for the first time.

As an RA, I am responsible for 25 students this year; many of those 25 students have moved out of home for the first time and are drinking alcohol for the first time; so that is a very important program to have. I am from Portland in the state's south-west, and I came to Geelong fresh out of home, fresh from year 12. I was 17, I was one of the youngest of the group.

I think that geography is a major barrier to university, given that I had to travel at least 3 hours to attend the course that I aspired to get into. There was no option for me to commute every day as people in Melbourne and Geelong perhaps have the option to do. The university residence was a great step in overcoming that barrier. When you attend university for the first time you are ripped from your community — your family networks, your youth groups, your sporting clubs, your churches and stuff like that. Going into a university residence was a great way to overcome that because of the support networks available.

In essence my role in its entirety is looking after the welfare of those students that I am responsible for and making sure that that transition from home to university is a smooth one. I found that to be a tremendous support to me in my first year, knowing that I was in a community. There are sporting, music performance, drama performance and

leadership opportunities throughout the colleges. I think that the university residence as a whole, in conjunction with the academic mentoring that has taken place in the last couple of years, has really given these students the support networks they needed to make that transition smoothly.

It is certainly much better than being in a house with one other person that you do not know and where you are very isolated. I do not think that that transition would be good. I think that the university residence environment definitely helps retention rates. If people are more secure in their environment and they feel important and included, they are more likely to stay at uni and not drop out and return to the home town.

The CHAIR — There are a number of questions we probably want to follow up with on that. Cost is an issue I am interested in getting a sense of — how much it costs to stay in university residences — and also what your knock-back rate is. We have been hearing from some students that — certainly in regard to Melbourne, but I am interested to know whether at Waurm Ponds it is an issue too — people get into uni and think that is great. They would like to live in the residence as a first-year student in particular but then they find that they cannot get in. I am interested to know what percentage of applicants are accepted or whether you do knock some back, and so on?

Mr TEMPLE — I can give you some dollar figures, if you want those.

The CHAIR — Yes, it is good to get a sense.

Mr TEMPLE — In Melbourne at the Burwood campus, which is a self-catered campus, it is \$7949.

Mr DEVEREAUX — This is for a 38-week period.

Mr TEMPLE — The academic year. At Geelong, which includes a catering package of five meals — you can have four meals plus a lunch; there are some options there — it is \$8399. Then at Warrnambool, which again has a three-meal catering package, it is \$6987. What that gives you is obviously the food component, and utilities, telephone, IT support and the residence support programs which I have indicated, and a range of recreation and social sorts of activities as well.

I guess off-campus varies a lot, but I think in round terms you can probably say, depending on the area, it may be about \$2000 to \$3000 more. This is where it gets a bit interesting, and I guess this is where we have experience. It is more because people take out rental accommodation because that is available within the local community and that would be a lease arrangement, say, for 52 weeks. I know some students, in weighing it up, say, 'I'll probably get a better deal if I can go off-campus. I can have more of a lifestyle off-campus'.

The reality is that then they are locked into that 52 weeks, they are sharing for the first time with, say, five or six other people, and they do not have that level of support. We know there are many providers out there, and I think that in the main they are doing a reasonable job but I guess people come on to the Res program specifically for things that we just outlined to you.

On knock-backs, on some of last year's figures, for Geelong, for the 200 places available — as I said, we have that mix between new and returning — we had 487 applications; for Burwood, for the 95 new places — it is a smaller campus — we had 332 applications; and for Warrnambool, for the 100 new places available there, there were 175 applications. Yes, there is always a very high demand, but — there is always a 'but', I guess — what we say to many folk who actually miss out is, 'Keep your name on the waiting list'.

Often what we have, according to the campuses, is some students — say, international students who might be on an international exchange program — who stay for first semester only. We say that because some of those move out we have vacancies in the second semester. Even if some people have said they have come for a year, after a few weeks or months, if it does not work out for them in terms of their course, they drop out as well. We have almost a secondary waiting list, if you like. We get in contact with those people and say, 'There is a vacancy now, there is a chance for you to come in'.

Mr DEVEREAUX — The bottom line is that we have far more applications than we can accommodate and that has been consistent for a number of years, particularly in the last few years as the rental market has really tightened up, particularly in Geelong and Burwood. The committee might also be interested in our assessment criteria.

The CHAIR — That was my next question: then how do you determine which ones you are going to accept?

Mr TEMPLE — The assessment criteria is that you have an online application — you go through that format — and a referee report. That is really an independent, hard-copy report that the prospective resident sends off to their VCE coordinator or perhaps their employer. That comes directly to us and that is important. That has things like how the person might make an active contribution to a residential community and what sort of sporting activities they might be involved in, not only their VCE academic performance; the applicant's age — we do have a mix of ages; their course of study; their gender; and, as I said, their attributes in terms of a community lifestyle.

What we tend to do within the units is mix up the genders, obviously, but also courses, so that within any one unit we have people undertaking different undergraduate courses so that they can actually meet together and be mutually supportive to each other. Another thing is distance from campus. Because the university is focused on rural and regional, most of them would come from at least 100 to 150 kilometres away. Many of them are from south-west Victoria, if they are coming to Geelong or Burwood, or even northern Victoria or interstate, for some.

Special circumstances and needs are also given due consideration. For example, if someone has a particular health or disability need, we would take that into account. There is the mix, of course, between first years and returning students. As I said, there is a mix in the student cohort as well, that mix between male and female and international and domestic students.

The CHAIR — Does the fact that you have less than half your overall places available each year to new students tempt you to suggest there should be ways that you could push second and third years out or ensure that you provide as many places as you can for first years?

Mr DEVEREAUX — It is a challenge.

Mr TEMPLE — That is an annual consideration.

Mr DEVEREAUX — The first response would be that just because a student is moving into second or third year does not mean that they are less deserving of a place. Their needs may be similar.

Mr DIXON — Do they have to reapply?

Mr DEVEREAUX — Yes. That would be one consideration. The other consideration is that we are trying to establish a supportive, positive community.

The CHAIR — I can understand that aspect.

Mr DEVEREAUX — Having some senior students in there obviously gives us some balance in the community. We need to recruit senior students with some maturity, for our RA program. There is a range of reasons why we retain spaces for second and third-year, or senior, students. In addition we try to keep some places available for international students, for short-stay exchange students.

It is a difficult formula for the guys to administer and I have to say it is not based on a strict formula. John and the team try to exercise as much flexibility as they possibly can so that the individual needs of the applicants are taken into consideration.

Mr LANE — It is a good support network, too, to have people there who have experienced the same thing, having the second years and third years that are living with you that have been through the same experiences that you have and that you are currently going through.

Mr DEVEREAUX — And a counter argument could be that first-year undergraduates have the highest needs, so we should reserve as many places as we can, and we try to strike a balance.

Mr TEMPLE — Also, I guess, part of that first-year intake is that Deakin has got accommodation scholarships which they have had for the last couple of years as well. Now they have got a focus. That is actually a pro rata payment of the accommodation fee, so there is in any one year — and this of course becomes cumulative year to year — 10 in Geelong and 5 in Warrnambool. So that is another mix in terms of our decision-making as well.

The CHAIR — Are there any plans to increase the number of student residential places?

Mr DEVEREAUX — The university undertook a feasibility study relating to the Burwood campus and demonstrated that there was adequate demand. We are likely to proceed to an expression of interest process this year. Whether that results and when that might result in additional accommodation being built, I really cannot say.

The CHAIR — Because we certainly heard in Hamilton yesterday of a personal circumstance where a child from Hamilton was at the Burwood campus, was living off-campus and was having a miserable time and thinking of dropping out. Those are the stories that no doubt you pick up and therefore pick up the need and demand.

Mr DIXON — Do you think there would be an instance where a student who actually lives in Geelong would be living at Waurn Ponds?

Mr TEMPLE — Living in Geelong and actually wanting to come into residence at Waurn Ponds?

Mr DIXON — Yes?

Mr TEMPLE — No, because we see that as clearly disadvantaging — —

Mr DIXON — There seem to be other universities that do not do that, which I think is incredible.

Mr TEMPLE — Exactly, because of the rural and regional focus of the university — —

Mr DEVEREAUX — There would have to be exceptional circumstances.

Mr TEMPLE — Yes.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Have you any data on students living off-campus, in terms of completion rates, comparing students who live on-campus and students who go to the city but rent a house?

Mr DEVEREAUX — Correct me if I am wrong, John, if there has been further developments but there is actually a lack of serious research around this question. We have undertaken some ourselves just within the institution and done some literature searches internationally but there is not any authoritative research on this subject.

Mr TEMPLE — We are leading the way in this case because Deakin is doing some national benchmarking on this, as John has indicated. Some of the unis have done some anecdotal stuff and admittedly what we have done with our planning unit, I can say, more than anecdotally, that the results from last year from residents or students living on res actually performed better academically and socially than those off res. Now I guess clear unequivocal data is what we are working on at the moment.

Mr KOTSIRAS — How many of those going in for the first time actually complete their course after three years?

Mr TEMPLE — We have not done the longitudinal data on that but after one year, certainly there is a higher retention of those folk. Those who want to stay obviously move in or continue on at res, that is one of the advantages. Also I think that because they have been successful in terms of their grade scores, then obviously it has led them into second year as well.

The CHAIR — Your selection criteria might skew that a little bit too, mightn't it, if you select the students — —

Mr TEMPLE — Who are academic and want to perform too?

The CHAIR — In terms of what you are saying about the selection criteria?

Mr TEMPLE — Yes, that is right, and that is one of the assumptions of the model as well.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Would full fee-paying students have priority over other students?

Mr TEMPLE — No.

Mr KOTSIRAS — International students?

Mr DEVEREAUX — Internationalisation is one of the university's core commitments, as with rural and regional commitments. As a result, we do reserve some places for international students.

The CHAIR — You have got 450 places at Waurn Ponds, so what percentage would be reserved for international students?

Mr DEVEREAUX — It goes between about 15 to 20 per cent or it might be down to about 10 per cent. There are some variations on that, particularly I guess in the cohort that might be 'study abroad' exchange students. That is something that varies a lot in that way.

The CHAIR — The other question then is: for the students who are not in residence — although that is not your doing, you have said the student union or student association helped to find places for them or have a process — is there a support mechanism in some way to support students who are living off-campus?

Mr DEVEREAUX — I guess in answer to that, the students who are living off campus have equal ability and right to access the university's support and welfare systems. It is always a challenge for us to communicate effectively to the student body that these services are available and to get them connected to those services when they need them. They are able to access general support systems; they are not able to directly access the additional programs that John and the team — —

The CHAIR — Although some of those support systems might really be the socialisation-type systems, and not particular welfare or anything. I suppose the compulsory union fee being dropped has threatened some of those activities. But I presume that there are still activities offered through the student union that try and provide social linking options. My concern is that a country student comes away from home, they can live out in rental accommodation but then they end up becoming isolated and lonely. I am wondering what systems are in place.

Mr DEVEREAUX — Yes, it is a challenge. It is recognised as an issue that the university needs to tackle, wants to tackle and has various programmes and initiatives to tackle that particular issue through both central administrative areas such as ours and also through the faculties. The faculties have programs to establish social networks and connections. The student association facilitates the formation of a variety of clubs and societies, some of them sporting, some of them non-sporting.

The faculties also facilitate the development and creation of those sort of groupings of clubs and societies as well, and some of them operate independent of the student association. There are a variety of actions in place to try and develop those social networks, but as I said before, it is a constant challenge and battle.

Mr TEMPLE — One of those programs is through the counselling services. This is where the counselling services staff work with individual faculties if there are particular students that may be vulnerable or even at risk so that they can assist the students but also they run group programs, as you have indicated Geoff, in terms of socialisation programs assisting the students to feel comfortable within a larger tertiary institution.

The CHAIR — Perhaps can I also then ask Aaron, as someone who has recently come from Portland: of the other students who came with you from Portland, did any others come to Geelong?

Mr LANE — There were two from my year 12 class who came, and we all lived on-campus in the residences in the first year and the two others subsequently left after first year on res, so they are just living in private rental accommodation.

The CHAIR — And continuing on? Have you maintained your link with them or because you have stayed on campus, established more links with other people in the same courses?

Mr LANE — We were not great friends to start with. We knew each other but it was out of 120 in the group, we knew who we were but that was about it. We have maintained that link, we see each around the place every now and again, but — —

The CHAIR — And they are staying on and happily completing their courses?

Mr LANE — Certainly.

Mr KOTSIRAS — When do you notify your students that they have not got a place or they have got a place? How early on? For example, if I put in an application, I wait for you to tell me yes or no. Do you tell me the following year when it is too late to me to find anywhere else to go? When do you tell me?

Mr TEMPLE — It is when the VTAC stuff comes out, so that is when we do the matching process between whether the university has made an offer to you in terms of the particular course preference, and then within that week of you finding out whether you have got into a particular campus, that is when residences will actually email you and sort of say, 'Yes, you have got a place on campus'.

Mr KOTSIRAS — But I have put in the application way before then.

Mr TEMPLE — Yes, but we have got to wait until the university actually makes its offers.

Mr KOTSIRAS — I understand that. I should be putting in applications to every single university if I want to do a course at that university? That would be the wise thing to do?

Mr TEMPLE — Some people do, yes.

Mr LANE — I applied for residence at three different universities based on my VTAC preferences.

The CHAIR — Following on from what Nick said, I was wondering: if you are a first-round acceptee for your tertiary place, you are more likely to get accommodation? But if you do not accept your first choice or are not accepted or whatever and your university place was sorted out later on, does that mean you are more likely to have missed out on a residence place?

Mr TEMPLE — It could be because the places are taken up very quickly. But in saying that I guess there are always some vacancies. Some people say, 'Yes, I want to do that course' or 'Yes, I want to live in res' and then they think about it and say, 'No, I might defer' or 'I might go somewhere else'. There are a small proportion of vacancies and they are the ones that might be able to be picked up in that way.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for your contribution.

Mr TEMPLE — Thank you for your time.

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

Colac — 29 April 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

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Executive Officer: Ms K. Ellingford

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

Committee Administrative Officer: Ms N. Tyler

Witness

Dr J. Oriel, head, student equity unit, Deakin University.

The CHAIR — Welcome, and thank you for coming along to address the Education and Training Committee and its inquiry. In Colac today we have heard from a very useful range of people in terms of providing information from all perspectives. Your perspective is going to add to that.

Dr ORIEL — Thank you for the opportunity to speak to the parliamentary inquiry. I would like to begin by summarising the key points made in the written submission, and then elucidating some of the strategies we are using to redress difficulties we face in access, participation and retention of students from regional and rural areas.

In the written submission to the inquiry, the vice-president of Deakin University, Ms Lin Martin, noted that the major differences in the participation of Victorian regional students compared with their urban peers are fourfold. Firstly, regional and isolated students are less likely per capita to apply for entry to higher education than their metropolitan counterparts. Secondly, participation rates for rural and isolated students in higher education in Victoria have declined during the past decade despite strong policy frameworks to increase their participation. Thirdly, deferral rates among regional students are much higher than among metropolitan students which, of course, affects the participation and access of those students. Fourthly, regional student retention in university education is significantly lower than that of the retention of students from metropolitan areas.

The lower access, participation and retention of regional students in university education and their comparatively high deferral rates highlight, I suggest, a systemic pattern of inequality in the education of Victorian students based on geographical difference. The pattern is apparent at Deakin University, whose campuses span almost 300 kilometres of Victoria from Melbourne to Geelong and Warrnambool, and the pattern is intertwined with low socioeconomic status (SES).

For example, the two campuses that are located farthest from metropolitan Melbourne record the highest proportion of regional and low SES students in the university, while the Melbourne campus at Burwood records the lowest rate of participation for students from low SES or regional backgrounds. In significant part, these differences are due to the demographic profile of the catchment areas of the campuses, and the ENTER scores required to access university courses, which increase progressively the closer that a campus is located to Melbourne. The lower clearly-in ENTERs on regional campuses are driven by the lower ENTER scores of students from regional areas. That particular point has been highlighted in Daniel Edwards' recent article.

In many ways — and I note this point has been made in other written submissions to the inquiry — the lower participation of regional students in higher education in Victoria is stimulated by a range of factors that coalesce well before access to higher education is a consideration and are related to school education. This fact has been recognised in the recent speeches of the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Education. Minister Gillard has stated also that equity in education is a moral issue, a statement that resonates well with Deakin University's core commitment to rural and regional engagement, and access and equity.

As a result of the fact that three of four Deakin campuses are located in rural and regional areas, the provision of equity to students from these areas continues to be a very high priority for the university. Our success in supporting equitable access to and enjoyment of higher education for people from rural and regional areas is evident in the consistently high access, participation and success outcomes for Deakin University rural students, as illustrated in the 2005 DEEWR Institutional Student Equity Performance Data.

I would now like to move on to the strategies that we have been engaging to improve rural and regional student access and participation over the past few years. The first is the 'Can my wallet afford it?' program. This program comprises a comprehensive publication and series of workshops held throughout the Western District for students, parents and teachers. It explains the costs associated with university education and assistance available from the government and the university that can mitigate financial pressures. This particular program highlights, I think, the importance of face-to-face contact and outreach activities in rural and regional Australia for universities seeking to increase their equity profile.

Reducing deferral rates of regional students through the annual SEAS strategy project is a strategy that was undertaken by the student equity unit in 2006 after seeing that the deferral rates of students who have accessed university through the special entry access, VTAC scheme, were much higher than that of students who were entering through non-equity means. The deferral rates were similar to the deferral rates of regional students at Warrnambool.

This was a much smaller cohort to work with to see if we could determine some of the reasons why they were deferring and what we could do to encourage their re-enrolment in the following year. The student equity unit has been contacting deferred SEAS applicants since 2006 to ensure that they feel encouraged to re-enrol and to respond to any questions or concerns that they may have that are impeding their progression to higher education.

In 2007 the SEAS strategy was evaluated and results indicated that students with whom the unit made contact re-enrolled at a higher rate — almost 50 per cent higher rate — than those who were not contacted. In 2008 the strategy will be extended to all students who have been offered a place at the Warrnambool campus who have deferred in order to try to reduce the deferral rate and to encourage re-enrolment among those students who have deferred.

The third major strategy that we have engaged since 2006 is the Deakin achievement awards. The student equity unit introduced awards in schools for the highest achieving year 12 student from an equity group. These awards were received with such enthusiasm by schools, recipients and parents that they were extended in 2007 to 106 schools. Among these, 60 schools were in regional areas. Faculty staff from the university presented the awards at 36 school ceremonies. Thirty-six per cent of the students who received a Deakin achievement award have enrolled at Deakin in 2008.

These awards are an important recognition of the accomplishment of students from regional areas and effectively debunk the myth both within the university and in the external environment that students from designated equity groups cannot achieve academic excellence. They raise the aspiration and esteem of students from equity groups to ensure that they feel welcome in the higher education sector.

From my experience of visiting schools, it is often the case that students from regional areas do not feel welcome in higher education. Many of them are first generation to university, as you will know. They have never been to a university campus. They think it is a different world, and they do not think they will be welcome once they arrive there. It is very important again to go into schools and to frame equity in the way that equity and equal opportunity should be framed, which are positive activities that can be undertaken by anyone to encourage equitable participation in all forms of education.

The marketing division at Deakin University also engages in a number of outreach activities among the students from regional schools. There are two marketing officers who occupy designated positions at our regional campuses. There is a rural and regional community roadshow, careers advisers day in Geelong and the facilitation of on-campus events such as campus tours and faculty workshops for regional students. As a result of the Deakin achievement awards, I was contacted by a number of schools who have never taken their students onto university campuses and who will be doing so this year at Deakin the first time.

As well as outreach and equity initiatives to attract regional students to higher education, Deakin University has expanded its operations on regional campuses by offering new courses that optimise excellence and curriculum design and development while meeting the specific skill shortages in communities we serve.

Examples of this progressive style of regional education include the development of Victoria's first regional medical school, which opened this year at the Geelong campus. The Deakin medical school aims to recruit students who are committed to working in rural and regional areas. Selection criteria have been developed accordingly. The students will be clinically trained in western Victorian medical practices and hospitals. On graduation they will provide the state with much needed medical professionals who will have an interest in and a commitment to practising in rural and regional areas.

Last week Deakin announced an additional health initiative to meet the needs of regional areas — the National Centre for Farmer Health. The National Centre for Farmer Health will be a partnership between Deakin University's medical school and the Western District Health Service and will focus on five core areas. The first point is sustainable farm families, which is intended to maintain and enhance farm families, with an emphasis on increasing outreach to high-risk communities; secondly, professional training and education; thirdly, applied research and development; fourthly, best practice clearing house; and fifthly, AgriSafe programs.

There are many other initiatives that Deakin University is developing to sustain vibrant regional communities, such as the creation of the Geelong Technology Precinct at the Waurn Ponds campus, the introduction of the early childhood education program at Warrnambool, which offers a fast-track degree program for students articulated

from TAFE, and strengthened partnerships with regional schools, TAFEs, local councils, learning networks, professional organisations and employers.

In light of the information given during this presentation, it is perhaps unsurprising to realise the degree to which Deakin University and no doubt other universities that maintain a regional campus presence build human capital in the communities we serve. I would like to emphasise data provided in the written submission in respect of this point, which is that in the Geelong local government area the expenditure by the university operations and non-local students attending the Geelong Waterfront campus and the Geelong campus at Waurm Ponds generates around \$360 million in output, \$175 million in gross regional product, \$85 million in household income and 1406 full-time equivalent jobs. In the Warrnambool LGA the equivalent is around \$62 million in output, \$32 million in gross regional product, \$13 million in household income and 216 full-time jobs, which are generated by the expenditure of the university operations and non-local students attending the Warrnambool campus. These findings indicate the extent, I think, to which Deakin University contributes to human capital in regional Victoria and indeed the productivity of the state of Victoria, by maintaining its core commitments to rural and regional engagement.

However, Deakin University's core commitments to regional engagement and access and equity are sometimes maintained in spite of rather than in concert with a commensurate financial contribution from the federal government. Our last audit of the operating costs of sustaining the Warrnambool campus illustrated that each year the university subsidises the campus to the extent of \$10 million. However, Deakin receives only \$600 000 per year by way of rural and regional loading from the federal government.

It is hoped that outcomes of this inquiry may include the development of initiatives to improve year 12 retention in regional schools; support for long-term schemes to improve the academic competitiveness of students from regional areas; the introduction of school programs designed to improve transition of regional students to higher education; the provision of an annual audit to universities which offers statistically accurate information on skills shortages in regional Victoria, disaggregated by region, to enable the further development of regionally appropriate courses; the introduction of greater financial incentives and penalties for universities related to performance-based funding for improving equity outcomes for regional students; and the introduction of a state-based scholarships system that targets innovation and excellence among regional students, and addresses lower access and retention among these students at university level.

With greater financial support from government and the introduction of substantial, long-term programs to redress the lower participation of regional students in post-compulsory school education and higher education, I believe the vision of an equitable Australian higher education system that engenders the spirit of innovation and enterprise among its students irrespective of their regional and socioeconomic status can be realised.

Mr DIXON — Jennifer, you mentioned that you have started following up the deferrers. When students you follow up say, 'No, we are not going to come back', is that for reasons similar to why they deferred in the first place? What sorts of responses are you getting?

Dr ORIEL — Sometimes their aspirations for university are not very high and they have decided to go on to more vocational education and training. They often feel positive about that decision, though, so we do not view that choice as a negative necessarily. In terms of the students we spoke with, some had transferred to other states and other universities, many were taking the gap year for financial independence, which is, as you know, is a big problem for the higher education sector — —

Mr DIXON — We have heard a lot about that.

Dr ORIEL — Yes, and unfortunately — —

The CHAIR — Why is that a problem if you pick them up anyway?

Dr ORIEL — We do not necessarily; they do not necessarily come back. The gap year, for students who are from low SES backgrounds and regional backgrounds who may be the first generation to university, and that break in education can impede momentum and they do not return. I think the gap year is unfair; it is particularly unfair to students who have no other form of financial support because they have to take it, whereas students who have other forms of financial support can afford to continue on their educational paths without interruption.

The CHAIR — Obviously you personally get out to schools, mostly with your research on deferrals and what helps students make up their minds about university. Do you concentrate mostly on western Victorian schools then?

Dr ORIEL — The university does concentrate on western Victoria. Next week I will be going to Mount Gambier as well and visiting a number of schools in the Warrnambool and western Victorian region to solicit opinions from principals about the kinds of access and equity programming their schools need and how we can support that from the university. In terms of my visits to regional schools, access and equity is often viewed as quite stigmatising, or can be. I think it is particularly important to tackle that head on and frame it in a way that it is really about competitive advantage and giving those students advantages they may not have received compared to their metropolitan counterparts during their educational life cycle.

The CHAIR — When you go out to schools are you part of the roadshow side of things, too, to promote Deakin University to those schools or to the students of those schools?

Dr ORIEL — Some staff from the student equity unit did go to the roadshows last year. We tailor different types of promotional and educational materials to schools, because often the message of marketing, which is about promoting courses and so forth, is quite different to the access and equity message, which is about raising aspirations and self-esteem and making students feel welcome. We create different materials — for example, last year the student equity unit created an access and equity DVD. It was distributed with a lesson plan that could be used in the year 12 curriculum to all schools in Victoria. It was received very well.

The CHAIR — What was the general content?

Dr ORIEL — The first part was senior executives speaking about their commitment to access and equity. As you will probably know, the vice-chancellor and vice-president of Deakin are both first generation to university, and the vice-chancellor was educated in Warrnambool, so access and equity and particularly the Warrnambool campus are very dear to her. The second part was an introduction which showed students in a very logical manner the different types of admission schemes that are offered in Victoria to access and equity students and scholarships that are offered. The third section comprised six students discussing how they used access and equity admissions and scholarships and different forms of support to help them through their university life.

The CHAIR — The last question I will ask relates to the issue of parents and helping to challenge the issues of aspiration of parents. Do you deal with parents too?

Dr ORIEL — I have only dealt with students so far. But in the expansion of the ‘Can my wallet afford it?’ scheme this year we will be speaking with parents. Those workshops are held in the evening, so parents will be a part of that at that stage.

The CHAIR — Are you aware of any programs that are being done in that area of working with parents to challenge their aspirational views?

Dr ORIEL — In other universities?

The CHAIR — Yes, or generally?

Dr ORIEL — Most of the programs of which I am aware tend to be held within school hours or within working hours. That is a restraint that tends to mean that parents are not contacted. It is common for marketing purposes to have that contact with parents. But there should be a lot more of it. I think the degree to which parents influence the educational choices of their children is underestimated in universities sometimes.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Can I finally ask: how successful have you been with all the programs that Deakin has put in place? Have you studied data to say, ‘When would you use this program that we have got?’

Dr ORIEL — It worked.

Mr KOTSIRAS — A high participation rate?

Dr ORIEL — We will have the interim data from all of last year’s strategies at the end of this week. I would be happy to send that to you, if that would be helpful.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Would you?

Dr ORIEL — Sure. However, I did a lot of work around the SEAS program last year. Do you know about the SEAS program? No? In Victoria VTAC offers the special entry access scheme, known as SEAS. The special entry access scheme application is filled out with the VTAC applications. It means that when students apply to university, VTAC sends us all a disk and it has different types of students. If they have filled out a SEAS application, they come in as a certain type of student — E type, I think it is.

When faculties or whoever a university employs to sort out their admissions are going through the admissions process they take a certain amount of students above the clearly-in ENTERS. Then there is the middle band, and in the middle band are the majority of SEAS applicants. In the middle band is where you apply SEAS commonly. If, say, two students have exactly the same mark but one student has a SEAS application, they may be re-ranked. It can give them a slight advantage.

It is not as effective perhaps across the board as the introduction of quotas might be. As you know, as you will have heard, the research released last year shows very disappointingly that despite strong policy frameworks at the federal and state levels to improve the participation of low SES and regional and rural students, during the past two to three decades there has been no shift in their proportional representation at universities.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Should they be offering bonus ENTER marks for regional and rural students?

Dr ORIEL — South Australia does, yes. Some South Australian universities do.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Has it worked?

Dr ORIEL — That is a possibility. It does work to a degree, but I think that — —

Mr KOTSIRAS — Say it, go for it.

Dr ORIEL — I think if government is really serious about social inclusion as a priority in higher education, there need to be more affirmative measures introduced across the board to ensure that all universities are responsible for improving the participation rate for students who are educationally disadvantaged. That does not happen at the moment. The wealthier universities have a pretty low representation of low SES and regional students. There is no incentive for them; no real penalty applies so there is no reason why they have to improve their performance.

I will say that all the work about advertising SEAS last year from Deakin has resulted in a very significant increase in the percentage of SEAS applications to the university. . I think a more proactive sort of approach to equity that covers promotions and advertising and outreach activities in combination works.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Jennifer.

Dr ORIEL — Thank you, Chair.

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

Colac — 29 April 2008

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Witnesses

Professor W. Brabham, director, and

Ms F. Cooper, project officer, Institute of Koorie Education, Deakin University.

The CHAIR — Welcome, Wendy and Fran. You certainly know what we have been talking about or listening to contributions about today. Yesterday in Hamilton we were very interested to hear from a number of representatives of Koori communities in that region and the issues that they have experienced. We certainly see that as being a significant area that we need to look at within this review and so we are pleased to have you along here today and look forward to your contribution.

Prof. BRABHAM — Thank you. I thank the government for asking us to come along and present. I am actually going to stick to the questions that you asked and sought a response to from the Institute of Koorie Education.

The Institute of Koorie Education has now been running for 20-odd years. We are probably now in our 21st year, I think. I have had the honour of being at Deakin for 20 years as an Aboriginal educator and I have seen it grow from small beginnings. We work very hard with the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated, which is the state adviser to the minister on all Aboriginal education matters affecting the 30 Aboriginal communities around Victoria. We were drawn to Deakin because of the distance education provision and we have grown out of that. We are now getting very entrenched into the online delivery as well.

We cater for mature-age entry and the university has an Aboriginal entry policy, so most of our students are mature aged. Most of our programs have been developed through community-based delivery and are responsive to the professional and training needs of Aboriginal communities, in line with self-determination and community development and also capacity building at the local community level. That is why we developed the community-based mode.

There are eight universities in Victoria and each has an Aboriginal education program. We are the only ones who have specialised in the undergraduate and postgraduate level of delivery of Deakin's degrees in a way that does not take Aboriginal students outside their communities. It maintains them while they undertake their studies for a degree.

We are probably now the state's largest provider of Aboriginal education and higher ed and we are also the third-largest provider of Aboriginal education nationally. Because there are so many Aboriginal units, we have to compete with the geographical locations around Victoria. We have tried to work in with those units and we try not to duplicate their programs.

We fluctuate from about 53 per cent down to 45 per cent enrolments coming from different areas around Victoria. The geographical location changes in response to the different programs that we can develop, especially in partnership with the state government, like when we had a Koorie entry into the education program. We tapped into a lot of geographical locations because the students who were doing teacher education training were being sponsored and paid a wage and they were being helped with their HECS-HELP fees as well. That helped us to hit probably nearly every geographical location.

More recently we have established a relationship with DHS, I think it still is, in-train scholarships. Is it still DHS?

The CHAIR — Yes, it still is.

Prof. BRABHAM — I am still confused with the change in the federal department. In-train scholarships are for our masters of public health program. Because we can pick up scholarships there, that encourages people who are working in Aboriginal medical services or medical programs around the state and so we are able to enrol students.

We have also established a relationship with the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development with scholarships and bursaries and also to help with HECS-HELP. That has helped us have students come in from as far away as Lake Tyers, Mildura, Robinvale and Swan Hill. It depends on what type of program we have and what type of financial support we can get for our students. A lot of our students do part-time study or full-time study depending on what financial support they get.

The CHAIR — What is the nature and range of the courses that you offer?

Prof. BRABHAM — We have about 22 undergraduate and postgraduate degrees and because of Deakin's flexible mode of delivery our model is very much entrenched in the delivery of those degrees. Our students come

down for intensive study blocks and then they go back to their communities or workplaces, so they live in their locations all around the country.

The CHAIR — What is the range of courses?

Prof. BRABHAM — We do teaching, social work, nursing, law, arts, and land resource management. We also support students in the HDR area as well.

The CHAIR — Do the graduates tend to stay in those communities or has there been much moving around once they have graduated?

Prof. BRABHAM — No. A lot of our students who graduate stay in their own communities and they add to their workforce. There is a high employment rate of our graduates. We are now averaging about 30 graduates a year. We could do better.

Mr KOTSIRAS — How many go into the courses and how many complete the courses?

Ms COOPER — It varies. If we are talking about individual student heads, to use the university lingo, this year our total enrolment was approximately 476 individual students. I think of those there would have been 200-odd that were commencing students, because of the part-time nature of them.

Mr KOTSIRAS — What percentage would complete their course?

Ms COOPER — It is interesting, because I have been doing some analysis of these figures. If you look at completion rates by course and you say, ‘Okay, of the number of students who go into this course, what percentage completes?’, it is not good; it is quite low. It would vary between courses, but it is below the national average.

If, however, you actually look at the number of students who complete a degree — and that might be in stops and starts and it might be between courses — at the moment it is sitting at around 30 per cent. It is very different if you look at the individual rather than just the government tendency, which is to say, ‘How many people enrolled in that course and came out of that course at the other end?’. It is the story, as I am sure Wendy would describe, of the individual — and, as someone said, they do not have the advantage of going from year 12 in Melbourne to the local university. It is much more complex, as you would appreciate.

I would argue that it is very important if you are looking at success or completion rates that you look at whether an individual student who starts at the Institute of Koorie Education gets a completed degree. I would argue on the basis of my analysis at the moment that 30 per cent of those students do get a degree.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Of the 400, there would be about 120?

Ms COOPER — Ultimately, and that would be over time, in various patterns.

Mr DIXON — You offer off-campus delivery as well. Do the numbers you are talking about, in terms of the numbers of students who are actually in courses, include them or is that another group again?

Prof. BRABHAM — No. That is them. I am talking about all the students who are enrolled in the community-based delivery courses, which pick the planned target of our CSP places that are offered.

The CHAIR — I am interested in this online learning. I would have thought there are lots of challenges in making online work when you do not have that face-to-face contact. I do not know whether you have teleconferencing opportunities to — —

Prof. BRABHAM — Yes.

The CHAIR — So how far do some of your students have to travel to even have access to teleconferencing?

Prof. BRABHAM — What we are trying to do with online study is to complement the mode of delivery which is community-based delivery, so our students come down and they have contact teaching times in one-week blocks or two-week blocks; then when they go back to their communities, we have contact either through online

facilities or teletutorials. In some places people do not have land lines and they will use the public telephone to do a teletutorial; so we try to fit around the needs within those particular communities.

With the online work we are trying to get the support of computers to establish a set-up with the students with laptops and things like that, and that means trying to get outside support for that as well.

The CHAIR — So do you rely on any other support bases within those communities?

Prof. BRABHAM — Yes, we also have the ITAS — the Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme — so we will have regional tutors in place. You could be, say, someone up in Echuca, and we would have an ITAS tutor to support you. That is funded by the commonwealth.

Also we do field trips. Our academic staff go out and support our students and do follow-up field trips. It is not only the supervision of practicums for social workers or teachers or nurses but also clinical placements and also just giving general support to our students.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Do you get much funding from the commonwealth for this program?

Prof. BRABHAM — Most of the funding is coming from the commonwealth, but if we set up programs like the Master of Public Health and the Bachelor of Early Childhood Education, we are being supported by the state in relation to scholarships.

Mr KOTSIRAS — And in relation to university itself? Are they assisting there?

Prof. BRABHAM — Deakin University has been very, very committed to Aboriginal education. The University put in \$2 million for the establishment of our student residence, which does not interfere with the other student residents' life because they are down on campus all semester, whereas our students are coming and going. We are very much embedded in the whole operations of the university and the budget model, and all of the designated funding that comes into the university for Aboriginal-specific programs comes straight into our budget centre.

We have a higher education agreement with the university, and the vice-chancellor signs that every three years. That is an agreed framework we work in, in implementing Aboriginal education. It is a very important higher education agreement.

Mr KOTSIRAS — To increase that from 30 per cent to 40 per cent, what needs to be done?

Prof. BRABHAM — We are constantly reviewing our teaching practice and how we deliver the program and how we deliver the courses. I think that the students who do not have financial difficulties, such as the ones on Abstudy or scholarships, are the ones who actually go through more readily. They go through in their due time.

There are a lot of other variables that impinge on success, and that has a lot to do with the social and cultural factors of where Aboriginal people are located, really. There is a lot of 'Sorry' business goes on — you have got to put that in place; and ceremonial matters — you have got to put that in place. You have got to also work up the expectations of the learner — how do you actually relate to the learner so that the learner really does take control and believe in himself or herself as a higher education student? That is so time consuming and you have to be so focused on it.

If I had answers for you to get the retention rates up, I would give them to you, but every day we are working on that. We have academic teams absolutely having individual student progression rates, just following the students' journeys.

The CHAIR — And recruitment? How do you go about trying to encourage people to take up courses?

Prof. BRABHAM — We are very much tied to the local Aboriginal education groups. We also get involved with job fairs and other community events, which highlight, but the biggest recruitment strategy that works for us are the students themselves and the success stories of the students.

If you have, say, someone who comes from Mildura and they are engaging in their studies at the local level, people see them and young students see them — maybe at the Koorie school there or the secondary schools there — and

people are engaging with them, and they know that they are Institute of Koorie Education students. The Institute of Koorie Education is very much a community-based program. It has been worked up by Elders right across the state.

In the Western District Aunty Laura Bell was one of the founding members. Aunty Iris Lovett, who has now passed on, was one of our first graduates in the master of applied science. A lot of elders and past elders have helped build this program. We also have good pathways with the Wurreker strategy that was rolled out through the TAFE, so we really work with the Wurreker brokers, and that is a good pathway that we get students coming in for the nursing, the bachelor of commerce and the bachelor of early childhood and the bachelor of social work as well.

The CHAIR — Lastly, have you any recommendations in terms of changes that you might have that we could influence? What are some of the things that might help?

Prof. BRABHAM — Greater access to scholarship funding and Victorian government traineeships, because that can become very time consuming. If the state government is very serious about improving the workforce, then they need to invest in higher education activities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Victoria. The state should become a champion in trying to negotiate to abolish the HECS and HELP fees at this stage until there is more parity in graduate outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

We need help — Koorie educators working in schools. I have raised this several times with different ministers of education. If they are doing studies with us, they are being released for their intensive study blocks, and they are having to take leave without pay. I have raised this issue several times with previous ministers and nothing has been done, and I think that does not support the workforce issues that governments say they are trying to amend for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

The other thing I am really worried about is that in the new partnership between the education department and the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated — Wannik, have you seen that policy? — there is mention of developing a professional learning package in partnership with universities and VAEAI that supports pre-service and in-service training for teachers in the history and contemporary culture of Victorian Koorie culture.

I would make a strong recommendation to this hearing that that money is not designated Aboriginal education funding, either within universities or within the state Aboriginal education funding pool, but that is state funding — to make a commitment in shifting the attitudes of teachers in schools, because a lot of that will be put on the onus of Aboriginal education units.

I also think universities should work more collectively with the Aboriginal communities in the planning and the rollout of Aboriginal higher education access, participation and success.

The CHAIR — Thank you. That is a message that is coming through clearly. Thank you very much. Fran, do you have anything to add?

Ms COOPER — I do not think so at the moment.

The CHAIR — Okay. Thank you very much for your contribution. It was terrific.

Prof. BRABHAM — What did they raise down in the Western District?

The CHAIR — A broad range of issues, but obviously having serious dialogue between the Aboriginal communities to identify the needs and the way the courses can recognise their particular needs was one of the key themes, and I guess the issue of numbers being a problem — that is, you have to get so many to be able to do a course. That is not achievable in a number of areas. Thank you.

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

Colac — 29 April 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

Ms C. Edwards, president,

Ms J. Nelson, vice-president, Warrnambool campus,

Ms L. Williams, vice-president, Waterfront campus, and

Ms B. Flatt, vice-president, Waurn Ponds campus, Deakin University Student Association.

The CHAIR — The committee welcomes witnesses from the Deakin University Student Association.

Ms EDWARDS — DUSA looks after the five campuses for Deakin, so that includes off-campus, the regional campuses and the urban campus as well, which is unique for student associations these days. For us, I think the main area of interest would be student services — the services that are provided to students who make university life attainable or successful, particularly in regional communities. Josie is from Warrnambool. In many cases when student services are lost, whether it be a medical clinic or — I do not know if I have got a good example — —

They tend to be lost from the community at large, not just from the university. Some of the things that we noted were that the potential for students studying at regional universities to be from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and that would often affect their time at university in their attitudes to university study, their ability to focus on their university study and the service that could be provided to them to assist them through that process were not often there, or were difficult to use and find.

The CHAIR — So what has the student association been able to do to help to address that issue or raise the profile of some of those issues?

Ms EDWARDS — For some of them we campaign. Obviously we spend a lot of our time campaigning on awareness campaigns. Since VSU life has been difficult to provide services along those lines. We have an agreement with the university to provide advocacy and housing for international students and regional students, but in general the university provides student residences. We provide an assistance service to be able to find housing. We cannot afford to provide housing.

The CHAIR — We spoke to the university earlier on today. They said, ‘We run the residences, but the students who cannot get into the residences, then the student association runs the off-campus stuff.

Ms EDWARDS — That is right. We have a database. The students can search the database for properties that may suit their need, whichever campus it is on or walking distance, mode of travel — things like that.

The CHAIR — So essentially all you are able to offer at this stage is the database?

Ms EDWARDS — That is right.

The CHAIR — Has that been sufficient? Do you have sufficient rental accommodation on your database to meet the needs?

Ms EDWARDS — I would not think anywhere near enough sufficient, but that is not necessarily something we can solve easily. That is just the way the world is. I think affordability is a massive issue, particularly for students in regional communities, because the work is not there. The factors that contribute to students actually being able to come to university and work to support themselves and have somewhere to live that is decent. Yes, it is very difficult.

Mr DIXON — So you are saying that part-time jobs available within the university campus are very limited?

Ms EDWARDS — Yes.

Mr DIXON — The locals get in first, basically?

Ms EDWARDS — Yes.

Mr DIXON — We heard that pretty strongly yesterday, too.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Are you all from this region?

Ms EDWARDS — I am not a regional student. The three girls are. Josie is from Warrnambool.

Ms NELSON — I study in Warrnambool, but I am originally from the Grampians.

Ms EDWARDS — Laura and Bre are from Geelong. I am from Melbourne.

The CHAIR — Which campus are you at?

Ms EDWARDS — I am at Burwood campus; I am a cross-campus resident.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Are the problems that students at your campuses have quite similar to the problems that you have in Melbourne?

Ms EDWARDS — I wouldn't think so. I think housing and the ability to get a decent job affects all students but it is more likely that students in regional communities will have to move out of home to study, and a much higher rate of students live independently from their families. There are less jobs, there are lower paid jobs, and there are less services to assist students in those communities.

Mr KOTSIRAS — From your year 12 class, what were the main reasons why students did not to go on to further education?

Ms NELSON — Where I am from, the majority of students will either head to Ballarat or Melbourne. A lot of them chose not to head to university in my year 12 class simply because their parents could not afford to pay for them to go. I was lucky with my parents that for one year they could but from my second year on, I have been supporting myself through university, and a lot of students have had to do that first off.

As soon as they leave high school, they have to get a full-time job and that is it, you have to go to university to get qualified to get better pay so you can send your kids and everything to university. In the long run no-one can basically afford to do it. It is a drought-affected area, and the majority of people are farmers and that is just it, they have got no money.

The CHAIR — You said you are from the Grampians but where does that mean?

Ms NELSON — I am from Wartook originally.

The CHAIR — So where did you go to secondary school?

Ms NELSON — I went to Horsham.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Your friends from year 12 who did not go on, why?

Ms FLATT — I think it was a lot of the same. The hard thing is, even coming from a middle-class income background, the course I wanted to do was in Ballarat. I was 17 at the time when I first wanted to go to uni, and I could not drive, and my only other option was to either travel up or live there and I could not afford to do that. My parents could not afford to pay for another household, pretty much. That was a massive deterrent because my only other option would be to catch however many trains to get to and from there every day. I think that is a really big factor. Student poverty is a really big issue and not having the money to be able to be there, to be able to just get through each day and be at uni.

Ms WILLIAMS — It is much the same with people who I knew from my high school. It was the cost of things. They could go and get a full-time job and be earning money straight away rather than going and getting higher education and having to pay all this money. But there was also the fact that they would have to go to Melbourne or Ballarat for particular courses because they were not offered in Geelong.

Ms EDWARDS — It is getting better than it used to be.

Mr KOTSIRAS — How many of you, when you finish your course, will come back to here, or how many of you will decide to live in Melbourne?

Ms NELSON — I would never go to Melbourne. I am sorry.

Ms EDWARDS — Josie hates it.

Ms NELSON — Country girl through and through.

Mr KOTSIRAS — And what about the other two?

Ms FLATT — I don't know. I am on a bit of a fence at the moment.

Ms WILLIAMS — If I was to leave Geelong, it would only be if I was offered a job somewhere else and if I could afford to live somewhere else.

Ms FLATT — In some ways I would love to be in the city, and in some ways I would love to just move down to the coast.

Mr DIXON — I have got to declare a pecuniary interest here. I live in a regional area. My son goes to Deakin. I paid his DUSA fees. Look him up: give him a hard time! Do you think students, because so many of them have got to work part-time to help support themselves there, would rather spend more time at the university and be more involved in the university community?

Ms EDWARDS — It has not been our experience, no. It is really hard. It is hard for us to engage. One of our responsibilities in the university community is to provide community, to engage students in more than just an education. But more and more students tend to want to come onto campus, go to class and leave again. That is very common. It is very hard to even stop them to talk about a campaign issue because they just want to go. When I reflect on that, I look at my own life. I work 60 hours a week, I work two jobs, study and I would not have time to stop and talk to me either. That is the way that it is.

Mr DIXON — I understand that is the situation but even if a student did not have to work part time, they would still just go there and get out?

Ms EDWARDS — It has not been our experience. Students tend to just want to be at uni, get a degree and get out. I am not sure if you are aware of the trimester proposal: there is a proposal or a discussion currently being had at Deakin to move to a trimester system which would change the dates of the semesters and have an optional third semester. Surprisingly, students have been very positive about it.

Mr DIXON — The purpose is to push through — —

Ms EDWARDS — You can do a three year degree in two years. Students have been really positive because they cannot afford to be at university for three years and have that three or four-month break in the middle of the year, every year. They see it as a waste of time. They would rather be studying and getting on with their lives.

Mr DIXON — There is another case that I am aware of relative to my son. A girl enrolled to do a course at Deakin in Geelong, and then once she had enrolled she found out she had to go and do some of the subjects at the Burwood campus, some of which start at 9.00 a.m. on a Friday, which is quite extraordinary. Is that usual?

Ms EDWARDS — It is reasonably common particularly between the two Geelong campuses. It is also reasonably common at Warrnambool because they have a business and law faculty that only does half the course. I think once they get to the second year of law they have to transfer to Geelong.

Ms NELSON — At the end of the second year we probably lose 100 students who go to the Geelong campus to finish their law degree.

Ms EDWARDS — Which would be a deterrent for me.

Ms FLATT — I think the unfortunate thing in the sense of people flying in and flying out of uni is that they are missing out on the uni experience as well, and socialising and networking. You never know who you are going to meet at uni and where they are going to be in 10 years time. The sad fact is that they are missing the opportunity to really interact with other people.

I think that is why some people tend to drop out as well. It is because they have to spend so much time working, and they do not have time to make friends; they do not have time to meet people. Then they are depressed and have a really hard time because they do not have people to hold their hand when things get a bit rough or they are not sure about things. It brings them down and it makes it hard for them to want to stay at uni.

Ms EDWARDS — We see statistics all the time which show that the students who drop out are students who are unengaged and who feel they have no support network. It is very hard to engage them. They do not think they need it until they realise it is too late.

The CHAIR — If a student is experiencing significant poverty issues, do they come to the association, and what can you do to direct them on? What are the avenues of support for them?

Ms EDWARDS — There are two areas. We offer one avenue, and Deakin Student Life, which is a division of the university, is the other. DSL does a lot of welfare and counselling. They provide a temporary loan scheme. I think they provide emergency accommodation and those types of services — real emergency or crisis stuff. DUSA provides the housing service. We provide things like that. We provide more ongoing support in terms of welfare-type clubs and groups, communities, societies, mentor programs and things like that.

The CHAIR — How are you able to organise those?

Ms EDWARDS — Get staff and volunteers who are excellent. It is really identifying need. We do a lot of free food and things like that as well.

The CHAIR — How do you get the funding for that?

Ms EDWARDS — It is just a service we offer. We have commercial services, and so commercial services fund our organisation and we provide services out of that.

Mr KOTSIRAS — If I was to ask you what two recommendations you would like us to put forward to assist students from regional Victoria to stay on and complete their course, what would be two things you would see as important issues?

Ms EDWARDS — For me it is responsiveness to student needs in our community. It is the idea that students need more support in those areas. I cannot speak for what the support may be, but the biggest problem that comes across to us is that the students are left alone. You were talking about retention rates. The ability for a student never to access a counselling service or a housing service because they did not know it existed, or because it was lost from that community, is a major problem. Do others have anything they want to add?

Ms NELSON — I cannot think now.

The CHAIR — All right. Thank you very much.

Ms EDWARDS — Thank you.

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

Colac — 29 April 2008

Members of the Sub-Committee

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Witness

Ms J. Golden, executive director, education programs, Gordon Institute of TAFE.

The CHAIR — Welcome, Jan. As you are aware, we are the Education and Training Committee. We have been seeking input in regard to issues of participation in higher education, in particular as it relates to regional Victoria. We have obviously heard quite a bit from Deakin University as well as schools from this region and students and parents today. It is quite appropriate that we hear from Gordon Institute of TAFE and get your perspective on some of those issues.

Ms GOLDEN — Thank you. I realise I am the last gig for the day; is that right?

The CHAIR — Yes.

Mr DIXON — Of two days.

Ms GOLDEN — I will try to keep it straight and to the point then. I have included some information here about what we term as our local delivery site — that includes Bellarine Peninsula through to the bottom section of the southern end of Golden Plains shire and Colac Otway shire. Today I really will be referring to the delivery in those regions rather than nationally and statewide, as we do in some of our delivery.

We know that there is a need to address the lower than state level participation rate from post-year 12 into certificate IV and diploma levels in the region. We have the reverse for early school leavers. We have a higher participation rate in TAFE, and I would say that is working well for referrals for our early school leavers.

Generally over the last five years we have about 2700 young people who are early school leavers in a variety of programs across the institute. That has been a major effort on our part in the last few years to look after those young people. Some of them have been out of school for several years before presenting back to the Gordon.

Another area that we are trying to address across the region is the high level of deferrals at university. In TAFE we do not have a deferral; you lose your place and you need to re-apply. But a lot of those people are then coming back to the Gordon or it is too late to get in. From the On Track data we can see that they are not taking up places either. They are not coming back after 12 months, particularly in the Colac area. That seems to be an issue here.

We are also trying to address issues at the moment of participation by postcode and areas of disadvantage. The Colac area is one of those areas where there is a low participation rate, particularly in certificate IV, and above, in TAFE. In other areas such as Golden Plains shire there is a high level of early school leavers, where their needs are not being met, coupled with transport and other issues.

Some of the strategies that we have been looking at are outlined on page 5 of my document. Through our strategic alliance, particularly with Deakin University, we are looking at promoting pathways and in pockets. Certainly Colac is one of those areas at the moment where we will be rolling out the pathways programs and really promoting that to exiting school-leavers, mature age people and parents.

One of the programs that we are offering here at the moment is the diploma in children's services and the ability to move into a third-year university place in the bachelor of early childhood education. We are going to be working with the schools to promote their services. We know that young people are not moving away from home, there is the cost of accommodation, the cost of HECS fees and so forth. We are trying to put some strategies in place to highlight what can be done in Colac and you then can take the pathways to Deakin University with minimal travel if you need to go to Geelong and Warrnambool, online learning and so forth. We are really going to be promoting that within the region.

The CHAIR — So how will that work in practice? What do they do as study in Colac?

Ms GOLDEN — If we use the children's services degree as an example, complete a two-year diploma then apply to Deakin University.

The CHAIR — And that two-year diploma can be offered here?

Ms GOLDEN — In Colac, yes.

The CHAIR — And as a physical study or as a semi-correspondence study?

Ms GOLDEN — No, the complete course is offered here, and then you can go straight into the third year of the bachelor of early childhood. That is offered by Deakin University and the University of Ballarat. So that is a very viable pathway for young people to take.

There is a range of programs in the business suite that can be promoted that way as well, and Deakin University has some flexible options to minimise travel and online learning, the same as the University of Ballarat. They will cater for groups around the region as well and come to the learners rather than the learners going to them all the time. We are really trying to pursue that and are getting a lot of support from Deakin University in that.

We know from other programs such as sport and recreation that the majority of our students are seeking a pathway, and that is the reason why they are doing the course. They may not have had the ENTER score to get in or they may have had financial difficulties. There is more and more popularity of our courses at a pathway level.

The other strategy that we have had in place particularly for this year, as outlined on page 6, is working in partnership with various secondary schools. Newcomb Secondary College in Geelong is releasing over 140 year 9 students to go to the Gordon one day per week. They will be undertaking modules from certificate I in vocational preparation, some hands-on vocational tasters for a full day where they get to try all the modules and so forth.

That is addressing the needs of that school because their students are not picking up VET and VCE options because of the cost. There is an extra cost; some of the programs work out to be about \$1000. To educate the students and their parents, we invite them to come in and see the facilities and find out about careers as well. A lot of parents do really push their young people towards university and do not really look at other options as well.

The CHAIR — How many days? Is that a one-day activity?

Ms GOLDEN — One day a week they release all 140 kids.

The CHAIR — For how long?

Ms GOLDEN — For 10 weeks, which is approximately 70 students at a time. We are working with disengaged young people in schools, offering programs in Geelong to try and keep them in school. Releasing them from school one day a week to come into the Gordon, motivate them to look at vocational careers and so forth — and we have had a lot of success with that. There are schools working with a similar program in Colac with their year 9 students there, particularly nine male year 9 students who are fairly challenging, but that started off very well as well. We have also been promoting with other agencies, girls in trades in the Geelong region as well.

They have been some of the strategies with just some of the schools we have been working with to try and improve the outcomes there. As mentioned earlier, we have also been targeting particular postcodes in Colac Otway and the Golden Plains shire to try and deliver more programs in the region.

Ms GOLDEN — But we do struggle with viable numbers. We have found that partnerships with other organisations has really helped, but it is quite difficult to move all the programs and facilities out into the regional areas, with the equipment and everything that goes with them.

Lastly, on page 8 of my report I have looked at some of the barriers that we have experienced in the recruitment of students. Generally they are financial. There is a growing need for our staff to look at fee waivers for students. The numbers of those who are accessing scholarships and other support are increasing each year. Transport in the region continues to be a problem for our students, particularly out of the Geelong region.

On careers information, I know the local learning and employment networks are trying to assist with that as well, but it is with secondary teachers and parents as well that we need to get the message through. We need to look at other flexible learning technologies as well, and as I mentioned before, we struggle outside our main delivery sites for viable class numbers. That is all.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Can I ask: all these strategies that you have put in place, have you seen any succeed? Have you seen more students staying on or more students applying?

Ms GOLDEN — In regard to the programs on which we are working in partnership with schools, some have been going for about seven or eight years now and the schools are reporting improved retention. They are the at-risk students who need to be out of the school, maybe because of bullying or other issues, and they are reporting

success with those students. With the more recent programs that we have been running with the schools in this area and in Geelong we are only just getting the data through now and reports back from the students; so far it has all been positive.

There certainly have been some behavioural boundaries that we have not had any issues with because it has been made very clear that this is an opportunity and we have not had any problems with that. So there has been a very strong message back to others within the school.

Mr KOTSIRAS — And do you find that the students that come to Gordon come there because they want to do a particular course?

Ms GOLDEN — Yes.

Mr KOTSIRAS — How do they feel about coming to a TAFE? Is that what they want to do?

Ms GOLDEN — For the early school leavers it is often a new environment that is a positive new start for them, away from their peers or maybe bad influences; they may have been bullied or they may have been bullying in that case. So it is usually a new start, and it is generally a positive start because there are no labels or baggage there and they can be quite proud of the fact that they are going to the Gordon — not that they are entering a program where they are still working on basic literacy and numeracy needs, but that they are going to the Gordon.

Mr DIXON — Jan, would it be generally accepted that if students who live in, say, Colac start their first year here in their local town, even if they do their further years elsewhere, that starting in their local town is a good thing? Is that a good model that works well — that they start to get more comfortable with the further education?

Ms GOLDEN — Yes, I think there is a competing force there in that young people go out to work for 12 months to qualify for youth allowance as well, so I think that is also adding to the rate of deferrals at the moment. But certainly cost and not wanting or not being able to afford to leave home are usually the reasons why people are deferring or out of education.

The CHAIR — That is not what Mr Dixon means. He means if you have a course offered locally for one or two years, is that likely to help to build that pathway to then go on?

Mr DIXON — To stay in the course, yes?

Ms GOLDEN — Yes, sorry. And it addresses the financial difficulties and personal difficulties, yes.

Mr DIXON — I was up in Mildura a couple of years ago and visited the Sunraysia TAFE. I think La Trobe University is there, too. I think they were saying that even if they just offer that first year locally — because they are very isolated up there — they have a tremendous retention rate then. The students go on to complete the course and are far more comfortable leaving town; and they are more likely to come back and live there as well.

Ms GOLDEN — That is right, and the TAFE environment is more supportive for mature-age learners and for young people, too, to develop their academic skills as well. That is really what we have been trying to push in this area and in Geelong with children's services — to complete a diploma and move on.

Mr DIXON — What we have gathered about the community here in Colac is that it is a wonderful thing to have as many here as possible.

Ms GOLDEN — Yes.

Mr DIXON — It is that tyranny of distance thing.

Ms GOLDEN — Getting the numbers here is also difficult, to be able to have viable numbers. We are really pushing it and pushing the partnerships with other providers. For example, Otway Community College can release students to access vocational training to complement their VCAL programs. It is not trying to compete — we are all running the same thing and dividing the market. I think there is evidence of that really happening here now, of people coming together.

The CHAIR — That is good. With some of the initiatives you have talked about, like being able to start one or two TAFE courses here in Colac, I presume that in terms of doing the work at the moment it requires funding to be committed from Gordon or other groups; meaning that while it is a good start, it is still limited.

Ms GOLDEN — Absolutely.

The CHAIR — How are you able to, first of all, get the funding to start with? Is it direct policy from the top, at Gordon? Is there some other push from lower down that is persuading the powers-that-be to release some funding? And how do you expand that opportunity to really push forward into, or push more further into regional Victoria?

Ms GOLDEN — We have had to look at areas of highest need or highest level of disadvantage. That is where we have funded the programs in Colac. Newcomb, for example, has been able to put in 50 per cent of the funding to run the programs for their students. We certainly could not do that for the whole region. Some of the programs are fee for service but they are generally supplemented by the institute. It is difficult and I think if every school said, 'What you are doing with this school and that school, we'll have five of those', we would not be able to service it. But we have had to look by postcode, participation rates and areas of disadvantage to address those needs first. It has mainly been the institute's funding to support that.

The CHAIR — I presume that students who come to the Gordon in Geelong would mostly be Geelong residents or do you get people who move to Geelong to come to the Gordon?

Ms GOLDEN — We do get a few — and I have not included it in the stats — who come from, say, Horsham. A regional city can be more attractive than metropolitan to other regions. We do get small numbers.

The CHAIR — From what you are saying it sounds like you are working mostly with Deakin and other universities to provide pathways from your courses on to, perhaps, degree courses?

Ms GOLDEN — Yes, we are certainly promoting it through our websites. We have joint open days with Deakin University so that when students come in to find out about our courses Deakin is there to talk about the pathways, and vice versa. We also have students exiting university coming into TAFE.

The CHAIR — That is good. I do not know that we have any further questions. That has certainly given us a perspective of where the Gordon is at and what opportunities there are. Thank you.

Ms GOLDEN — Thank you.

The CHAIR — I declare this hearing closed.

Committee adjourned.