

# CORRECTED VERSION

## EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

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

Robinvale — 2 June 2008

#### Members

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

Chair: Mr G. Howard

Deputy Chair: Mr N. Kotsiras

#### Staff

Executive Officer: Ms K. Ellingford

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

Administrative Officer: Ms N. Tyler

#### Witnesses

Mr D. Hovenden, chief executive officer, Swan Hill Rural City Council;

Ms R. Kava, chief executive officer, and

Ms K. Hare, community relations officer and media manager, Gannawarra Shire Council; and

Mr M. Tolson, horticulture relations manager, Timbercorp Ltd.

**The CHAIR** — It is good to be in Robinvale as the parliamentary Education and Training Committee, and I am pleased to formally declare the hearing open. Those present would be aware that we are inquiring into geographical differences as they relate to participation of Victorian students in higher education. All evidence taken by the committee, including submissions, is subject to parliamentary privilege, which effectively means that you are free to say anything you like and you are covered for anything you say as long as it is said in here. You will see that you are being recorded so that we have on record everything that is said in the inquiry.

I am very pleased to see that representatives from both Swan Hill Rural City Council and Gannawarra Shire Council are going to speak to us today. Roseanne, you are going to speak first. Welcome, and we are looking forward to the contribution that both of the shires have to make in respect of this significant issue.

**Ms KAVA** — Thank you very much, Mr Howard, and welcome everyone to northern Victoria. It is a great pleasure to have you in our part of the world, and I am pleased to see that we have turned on some beautiful weather for you. I hope you enjoyed your little tour around Robinvale.

I am kicking off by talking a little bit about Gannawarra shire and largely talking to the submission that we provided. Gannawarra shire is located between Campaspe and Swan Hill along the Murray River. It has an area of just under 4000 square kilometres and a population of around 11 000 people. It is about a 3-hour drive from Melbourne, and of course the major centres around it are Bendigo, Echuca and Swan Hill. Mildura is that little bit further.

I think it is important to point out that the average household income in Gannawarra Shire is about \$36 500. This compares to the state average of about \$53 000, so clearly we are significantly less than the state average. The median individual household income is only \$19 600, compared to the state average of about \$23 700. Again you can see some significant disparity in the income levels of people in this part of the world. About 20 per cent of the population is over 65, and about 20 per cent is under 15 years of age.

Over time what has been occurring is that the number of young people has been declining and the number of older people has been increasing. Agriculture is our largest employer, and retail manufacturing, health and community services are the next largest employers. Agriculture and dairy are two of the main industries.

In terms of higher education or further education, the Kerang Learning Centre is the one provider that we have in the Gannawarra shire in terms of that opportunity. The Kerang Learning Centre offers some short courses and a small range of accredited certificate 1 to 4 courses. Business, aged care and information technology are the areas available. Of course, Swan Hill is only 45 minutes away from Kerang, and the Sunraysia Institute of TAFE is located there. That is the closest alternative provider. The Bendigo Regional Institute of TAFE is about 1½ hours away, and that is the next closest.

It is important to note that Gannawarra shire has half the number of people with tertiary qualifications than the average for towns in the rest of Victoria. The statistics you will have seen in the Murray Mallee LLEN presentation in terms of enrolments show that years 10, 11 and 12 have shown a decline over the last four years. Of course these statistics do not include Cohuna which is also in the Gannawarra shire because the LLEN districts do not coincide with the borders of the shires.

Over time the participation in VET courses has increased from 33 per cent to 38 per cent between 2003 and 2006. Local participation in VET is above the regional metropolitan statewide average, so you are seeing less students going on to university; you are seeing more students participating in vocational education and training.

In terms of university participation, fewer people from this area apply for university, are accepted and complete their studies. I think the Murray Mallee LLEN LCP data indicates through their environmental scan a 5 per cent drop in university enrolments from 2002–04. The trend is very concerning. It is quite difficult for young people to aspire, almost, to university education in this area, and then we find that the number who actually get there and complete their work is certainly nothing like the full complement who achieve entry.

I have already highlighted the lack of income for many people in Gannawarra shire. That really disadvantages them. The geographic location means that a higher proportion of their income needs to be provided to allow their children to be educated in the larger regional centres or in Melbourne. A study by Webb in 2005 indicated that 30 per cent of families in the federal electorate of Mallee, in which Gannawarra shire is included, would use 50 per cent of their disposable income in order to send just one student to a tertiary institution in Melbourne.

A local person advised me only last week that the cost for them, after tax, of sending a student to Melbourne — just the cost of accommodation and food — was in the order of \$16 000. When you take into account the statistics I provided at the beginning of the presentation in terms of the median incomes and the average household incomes, you realise that this is clearly almost an impossible task for many people in this area.

In regard to some of the barriers to participation, clearly drought has not helped; it has had a huge impact. Students have become very reluctant to even ask their parents or discuss with their parents the possibility of tertiary education. They are aware that their parents are under a lot of financial pressure and a lot of uncertainty, and they do not want to place an additional financial burden on them. We are finding that there is a delay while students take a gap year to try to gain independent status under a youth allowance, and they still have difficulty earning the income that is required to support them during their studies. I am hearing even at school level that there are students who are working up to 20 hours a week while they are at school just to try and ease the financial burden, let alone when they get to university level and are having to find jobs in the major cities to help support themselves.

The local principal at Kerang has made the observation that he has been along to the football and noticed that quite a number of students who had gone to university have returned. We are finding that for a whole range of reasons these students are finding it very difficult once they get into the city, not only in respect the financial side but also the cultural side and the family support to survive the rigours of university. I do not know whether you all remember your early days at university, but there is quite a culture shock in going from school to university in any case. If you add to that the complexity of coming from a very different environment and are mindful that there is a lot of financial pressure at home you see that it really does make life fairly difficult for these students.

The work that has been done in this area has indicated that young people do not want to leave their homes to study. They are quite keen to study locally if a way can be found to do that. One of the LLEN surveys conducted in 2005 on years 11 and 12 students indicated a high desire to study locally either for a full course or for the initial years of their study. That would potentially make a tremendous difference to some of the families in terms of accessing that level of education.

Because of the low proportion of people in this area with tertiary education we probably lack some educational role models. We also have a lot of people who see apprenticeships and traineeships as offering greater job opportunities, and of course there is the added attraction of being paid while they are undertaking their training; it makes a difference to quite a few of them.

The advantages of participation were highlighted in our submission, and there are some there in the presentation, a copy of which I have given you. I will not belabour the point, mindful that there are other speakers. Clearly the disadvantages of participating in higher education for many students include having to reside away from home; the financial drain; the impact on the money that is not being spent locally; and the impact on the families and their ability to provide emotional support for students in what for many is a stressful time, that changeover to higher education.

The studies by Professor David Battersby have shown clearly that the students who leave to study do not return: 77 per cent of 18-year-olds from regional areas who go to Melbourne for university do not return. On the other hand, 79 per cent of 18-year-olds who attend university in the regions stay in the regions, so it is certainly in the interests of this community and its future to provide a service so that young people can actually attend university or part of university here and then continue on with their studies. Of course, if students are not going on to study it is further reducing the skills level in this community and that too ultimately has economic impacts.

We have issues with the participation rates in terms of the local businesses accessing skilled employees, and I am sure Max will talk more about that. In Gannawarra shire we have had skill shortages and we have skill shortages in dairying, engineering, town planning, health — particularly nursing, which is one that has been mentioned of late — accounting, welding and other trades. We are looking at some innovative approaches between the two councils. For example, we are looking at sharing a design engineer because there is always difficulty in attracting engineers not just in northern Victoria, I would have to say, but perhaps more widely. So we are looking at innovative ways of doing that.

The impact of reduced access to educational facilities is that it makes it much more difficult to attract new residents and obviously reduces the ability of businesses to attract skilled staff. At the end of our presentation there is an email that I have copied; it happens to be from somebody on the medical side of things, and they make it clear that

in looking at coming to northern Victoria and our region, one of the questions that they immediately have concerns education.

What level of education is available for their families? This is something people ask before they will even consider coming here. If we do not have that, we are really going to find, and are finding, life quite difficult. We have indicated a few strategies to address some of the barriers, including establishing a university locally in some form and providing greater funding to local education providers so that they have got a greater range of courses.

Regional scholarships that cover away-from-home accommodation expenses would certainly be a great assistance for the many people in this shire who find the cost so prohibitive. Contributing to students' fuel or travel costs is another suggestion, but ultimately providing more online and flexible delivery courses may be a way forward for the future. I would say though that that is not an optimal way to provide education. There is a range of limitations.

As an adjunct or a supplementary form of education it certainly has a lot to recommend it, but clearly students need to have more contact with their teachers and also with their fellow students; this is part of the culture of education and being educated. I think I might stop at that point, Mr Howard, and hand over to Dennis Hovenden.

**Mr HOVENDEN** — Thank you, Roseanne, Chair and members of the committee. I think Roseanne has probably captured everything that we need to say. I think it is a magnificent overview of the situation that we are facing here in this particular region. I guess the key for the committee and more importantly for the council and the communities that we serve is to find solutions; hopefully while you are travelling around regional Victoria, the solutions will become evident.

What I think is required is a partnership approach. It involves and probably will require all three levels of government working with education providers and certainly the community and our young people to find that solution. Our young people have the same aspirations, goals and dreams as any other person within the state and quite clearly at this point in time, for a variety of reasons as outlined by Roseanne, they are not meeting those goals and aspirations. They are being disadvantaged.

As the Swan Hill Rural City Council, we strongly endorse the work of the Murray Mallee LLEN and the statistics that they are producing, and their executive officer will go into great detail about those in the next presentation. We endorse their work and have developed a close working relationship with the LLEN and our fellow local government authorities. We see the work that the committee is doing as linking very closely to the commitment that Minister Wynne, just in the last fortnight as local government minister, gave local government in that he would take back to the Premier a message that there is a requirement for a regional Victoria strategy of which higher education is one key component.

It is true that when people look to relocate to places like Gannawarra and Swan Hill, one of the key questions that they ask, amongst many, is about education and the ability to be able to pursue education beyond secondary college, and there are other factors such as health. So I believe that the work that this committee is doing should be conveyed to Minister Wynne who can then ultimately take it back to the Premier and tell him that regional Victoria needs an overall strategy embracing higher education.

As a council, we have commenced work with our friends at TAFE, looking at how we can build upon the partnership to find solutions. My council has allowed the use of council facilities to provide training in the areas of hospitality, tourism and, in recent days, construction at one of our key facilities, the Swan Hill Pioneer Settlement Museum. We break down the barriers, we open the doors, and we want to work with our education providers because we believe that if we can work very closely with them in doing things in an innovative way, we can give our young people the opportunity to actually pursue their studies. Is the answer greater use of council facilities? Perhaps it is, and I think that we stand prepared to work with the state government to try and find a new way forward.

In a former life I worked on — and you may take this up and get some ideas from your parliamentary colleague Bernard Finn — a similar exercise in the Macedon Ranges where there was a very low participation rate in post-secondary education. At that time, the solution was a bricks and mortar one, and it was the former Caloola site in Sunbury. It was going to wrack and ruin. It was government-owned. Ultimately, Victoria University was established within a regional setting albeit very close to Melbourne.

It provided the catalyst for the Macedon Ranges people to be able to actually live within their community, travel and get tertiary education. It was the solution for the time because it also gave the state government the opportunity to develop land around the Caloola site. But perhaps today the solution is not in bricks and mortar. The solution to delivering university higher education services could be in that technology that Roseanne has mentioned. As a council, we face the shortages that have been put on the table in terms of engineers, town planners, accountants etc. Within our organisation we have the capacity in terms of the new technology, the videoconferencing, to again perhaps open the doors and provide a possible solution that of course could be delivered within a council facility using that new technology.

The problem is real. We live it every day, and this afternoon you will hear first-hand experience from some of our young people who actually go to Melbourne and cannot make the transition for whatever reason: the support mechanisms are not there, their way of life is completely different from what they were experiencing and ultimately they come back. They have had their dream and it has been taken away from them. So we need to work extremely hard to find a local solution knowing all too well that bricks and mortar solutions may be beyond the capacity of all of us here. We commend the committee for taking the time to come to our region to hear of our plight, and we look forward hopefully to the solutions that the committee will put forward to the Parliament. Thank you, Chair.

**The CHAIR** — Thanks, Dennis.

**Mr TOLSON** — What I propose to do is talk to you about my personal family situation and then some of the things that the company I work for, Timbercorp, has been doing in the area. Some, in terms of post-secondary training, would give you some heart; some aspects of the human resources we have would give you quite some concern in terms of training and education.

In terms of my own family situation, my wife and I moved into this area 30 years ago. We were both, relative to the situation we are in now, not terribly well trained. My wife had a diploma in nursing, and I had a diploma in applied science and agriculture. In the ensuing years we have managed to eke out the time and course fees and whatever. In the case of my wife she now has a degree in nursing, a degree in midwifery and social work and a few other bits and pieces along the way. In a personal sense, she has put a lot of time and effort into upgrading her skills as she has gone along.

In my case I was fortunate to undertake an MBA in agribusiness, totally externally — it was the only way I could do it — through New England university. That broadened my outlook on the work I was embedded in; it helped me and gave me opportunities that a lot of other farm managers and people involved in agriculture just do not have.

Unfortunately that motivated our children to also seek out a good education. It is currently costing us \$48 000 a year for two children, one at university and one at boarding school in Adelaide. You could say, ‘That is a bit elitist, sending your kids off to school’, and we certainly see that: where families cannot afford to do that, their children are certainly disadvantaged.

One of the major reasons we have sent our child off to a boarding school is so that they can make that transition to university-based training. With a lot of children, and we have seen many instances amongst our friends and acquaintances, the culture shock that Roseanne mentioned is just too great; the change from a nurturing family situation to a totally different environment. I am sure there are statistics that back it up; it is just far too great. That is what we have attempted to do. But on \$48 000 out of pocket, you can do the calculations on what that is pre-tax. It is an enormous commitment. We are happy to do it, but many just simply cannot do it.

In terms of Timbercorp and our investments in this area and the ramifications in terms of training and education, we have invested several hundred million dollars in the area, in both olives and almonds, and created around 400 new jobs in the area. With our olive enterprise the founders and managers of Boundary Bend Ltd, our contracted managers, got to know each other while they were at university doing their ag science degrees. They have tended to attract amongst their staff — of which there is now around 40 here locally, and they employ another 150 or so in the Geelong area in packaging et cetera — people who originally lived in the area, and then went off, did their tertiary training and worked around Australia and overseas.

They have created an environment where they have been able to attract those tertiary-trained people back. So there is a culture within that particular business, that organisation, to facilitate training and education. So the culture, I guess, within that organisation is very sound, and you would have a great deal of hope. I know they are pursuing just what methods they can use to up-skill all of their workforce on a continual basis.

With our almond enterprise, by contrast, where most of our people are employed, the situation is quite different. There are a few people who are tertiary qualified and trained appropriately for their positions, but the vast majority are captured from the local area and, you would have to say, would be amongst the most low-skilled of workers that you would find anywhere. I am sure that even if you went into factories in Melbourne, you would find that the level of skill and training would be much, much higher.

That creates challenges for the business in terms of developing systems that can cope with that level of skill and training. It seems to me that you get intergenerational problems and issues. One of the problems in these areas is that the lower-skilled workers are paid less; so they are not motivated or they do not have the financial wherewithal to encourage their children to take on higher education and training, and so it becomes self-perpetuating.

**The CHAIR** — Max, you are saying that in that industry you do not require the skills?

**Mr TOLSON** — No, we do require the skills, but you have systems where you spread the few people who are trained and skilled very thinly — more thinly than would be desirable. We are on a knife edge all of the time. I know there is one couple, they are both highly trained scientists who were trained overseas in this area. If they leave this area, it will be for the education of their children. They are looking at the costs. They have talked to my wife and me about costs and just when you should send kids off and when you do not. It is quite daunting, from both a family and personal point of view as well as a financial point of view.

**The CHAIR** — We are getting pretty tight for time in terms of this part of the submission. Would some members of the committee like to follow up with some questions now?

**Mr KOTSIRAS** — Yes. Would there be a large number of students who leave to go elsewhere to do their courses and who are not returning to this region? If so, what is the shire doing to encourage more of those students who go away and do courses to return to this region?

**Ms KAVA** — Yes, there is a high proportion, and I mentioned some of the statistics that Battersby listed. So yes, people do leave. But young people have left their towns and their cities traditionally for many years; it is part of being young that you go and try something new. It is an issue in terms of attracting either the same students back or attracting other young people. You certainly do see some very outstanding examples of people from the area who have gone and done their higher education in Melbourne and have then decided to return.

There is one in Swan Hill: the leader of the, I think, Young Professionals network, who went to Melbourne and did law and came back after practising for a few years and is part of a horticulture venture that has won numerous awards. So there are certainly some outstanding examples of people who do return, but there are many — the higher percentage — who do not return.

In terms of what council is doing to attract people, we are certainly trying to, obviously, push the education issue and the higher education issue so that there are options for people to stay in the area because we find they are the ones who will continue on. They are already familiar with the lifestyle of northern Victoria and value that in many cases for raising their children. So they are interested, some of them, in returning and working in that environment.

In terms of our economic development opportunities, we also try to make the area attractive and work on recruiting new types of business, diversifying our economic base so that there are opportunities for young people to come back. We would certainly be very welcoming of any young people or older people who are interested in being part of our future, who are innovative and prepared to look at the world a bit differently and to create new opportunities in our environment. We certainly try to provide that by supporting inquiries from young people who are interested in coming to the area and advertising widely in terms of what some of those opportunities might be.

**Mr HOVENDEN** — What we find is a lot of young people come back because that is where their roots are, and they are justifiably very proud of this part of Victoria. Secondly, a lot of people who actually study then probably like to actually continue their study. If they do come back to the region, how do they then access additional study? Thirdly, in terms of local government we are in a very competitive market. We have spoken about the engineers. We are having to compete against local governments in Melbourne who have post-secondary education on their back doorstep to be able to say to Fred or Betty, ‘Come and work at the council. We can continue your studies et cetera’. We have a difficulty in trying to do that in attracting people in that same way.

The key factor is that people wanting to come to our region, as I have indicated, look at a number of key things — obviously employment, housing, health and education, not only for themselves but for their families et cetera. It is a very competitive market. Any assistance that we can get through inquiries such as this one, I think, would be gratefully appreciated.

**Mr DIXON** — I noticed from your submissions that this is a very low income area. In the *Age* today the government has announced it is going to be re-looking at a restructure of TAFE. One of the proposals is the doubling of up-front TAFE fees. Would that have an impact on people in this area?

**Mr TOLSON** — The simple answer is yes.

**Ms HARE** — Part of the reason that the students go to TAFE is not just because we actually teach them TAFE courses but that it does not cost them very much at the moment, and they can afford to do it.

**Mr HERBERT** — I am not sure that it actually said there was the proposal for all TAFE fees, but that is another issue.

Firstly, is the population of the two shires increasing or decreasing? Do you have net loss? I am just trying to get a feeling for the students going out and people coming into business.

**Mr HOVENDEN** — In terms of Swan Hill, we had a marginal increase.

**Ms KAVA** — And we had a marginal decrease.

**Mr HERBERT** — So it is relative, people coming out, is it? Just on a specific question, have you done any studies or can you point the committee in any direction where you could quantify what you think are the required numbers of HECS-funded places in this region to maximise your economic development. Are we talking a couple of hundred places? Have you got any information on that?

**Mr HOVENDEN** — The short answer is probably no.

**Mr TOLSON** — There is the mid-Murray master plan that looked at some of the very rapid horticultural development and did a breakdown of the employment, new jobs in the area and the level of skills. That was just in very broad terms, so that is one small snapshot. I think the figure was 50 or so tertiary-qualified positions. That is one small piece.

**Ms KAVA** — Gannawarra Shire Council has not itself done that type of study, but I understand that the mid-Murray tertiary education task force or group, which has been operating now for a couple of years, includes Swan Hill and Gannawarra, and I do not know whether it is Loddon or Wakool shires. But it is very interested in creating a tertiary university presence. I believe it did some work in that regard, but I do not have that data to hand.

**Mr HERBERT** — We can chase that down. The only other thing, following on from Mr Kotsiras's question in terms of the councils, do you work with businesses to create — and we have Timbercorp here — graduate employment incentives or recruitment programs or perhaps third-year scholarships to link employment and that sort of thing, working with industry?

**Mr HOVENDEN** — From Swan Hill's point of view, we have a scholarship program where each year we highlight areas such as engineering and town planning. We look to contribute in a minor way towards those people going through the tertiary program might encounter.

**Mr HERBERT** — Do you find local business and industries are willing to contribute to that?

**Mr HOVENDEN** — I cannot speak for the local business. The council realises that we are probably not going to get all of those people who go through the scholarship program to come back and work. But it is obviously an investment, and hopefully one day we might get a few of those people back.

**Ms KAVA** — We have a similar scholarship program that runs at our council, and certainly engineers have been a particular focus. We had three or four scholarship engineers over the last couple of years. The interaction with business is probably a little ad hoc in terms of encouraging them. We work closely with business

on a range of economic opportunities. One of those is what are the skills that are missing. What sort of assistance do you need?

We certainly do lot of work in identifying those types of skills, but as an organisation we have not seen it as our role to undertake it. The LLEN, I know, is very conscious of that area and trying to connect with business. I think that is an ongoing area that needs further development.

**Mr HERBERT** — Thanks. They are the next witnesses, so we will ask the question then.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you for that. I am concerned that we need to keep going with our time schedules so that we can have the Murray Mallee LLEN group speak to us. It is very useful to hear from all of you to put an initial perspective in place.

**Ms KAVA** — Thank you for the opportunity.

**Witnesses withdrew.**



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

Administrative Officer: Ms N. Tyler

#### Witness

Mr G. Stewart, executive officer, Murray Mallee LLEN.

**The CHAIR** — Glenn, welcome; thank you for coming along. We have seen that you have made a submission already to the group. We have had a look over that, but we are certainly pleased to have you further enhance on what has been put forward in your submission.

**Mr STEWART** — Thank you very much, Chair and members of the committee, for coming to Robinvale today. I will give you a little bit of background first of all and then I want to move into the model that the Mid-Murray higher education working party has been working on over a period of time.

The LLEN auspices the Mid-Murray higher education working party which is a partnership between five local government authorities, they being the Shire of Gannawarra, Swan Hill Rural City Council, Buloke Shire, the Shire of Balranald and Shire of Wakool. Therefore, we represent some 50 000 people in relation to this particular region, both in Victoria and in New South Wales.

In 2004 when the working party came together there were a whole range of terms of reference for this working party to look at, one of those being an audit of the tertiary courses that were already occurring within the region. There was also extensive discussions around what type of courses would be needed or required in the region, about improving access, particularly for young people, but also about upskilling. It is normal for LLENS to talk about young people of 15 to 19, but I will focus today around the opportunities also existing in this type of work for upskilling, and you have already heard Max talk a little bit about that.

The other terms of reference are to liaise closely with the regional secondary schools and to liaise closely with industry. I take the point that Steve made before about the industry networks given the blueprint provided by the Victorian government; that is an extremely important issue. There is also the upskilling of employees, and a model was to be developed by the working party.

In reality, even though there were 50 000 people within this area, the disparity of population would cause some issues in relation to the establishment of a university campus, so it was always the intent of the working party not to establish a campus or bricks-and-mortar approach but to utilise the existing infrastructure that abounds in this particular region. It must also be demand-driven in terms of the types of courses that can be offered in the central Murray or mid-region.

The communities of the mid-Murray region, as you have already heard, have some of the most socially disadvantaged data in the state. If I could just get the members to look at our original submission — I know you have heard a fair bit about this but I will quickly go through it to emphasise a couple of points. In the first table on page 2 of the submission you can see that the Murray Mallee LLEN has the third-highest at-risk categories in the state in terms of young people coming through the system. Categories (d) and (n) indicate students with either unskilled or unemployed parents, therefore the department deems them to be at significant risk of falling out of the system.

Professor Tony Vinson, in his report *Dropping off the Edge*, highlights five communities within the Swan Hill catchment of being Vinson communities. Webb in 2005 highlights that 30 per cent of families in the Mallee electorate would use 50 per cent of their disposable income, as you have heard before. We have particularly high rates of single parents in the region — I believe it is close to 5000, as I was informed just recently — so we have a significant issue in terms of people's ability to support young people through the system in its present form.

The region has one of the highest indigenous rates in the area, but I think on page 5 is probably the critical thing that Roseanna Kava alluded to before — that was the dramatic drop-off in participation at university level in the state of Victoria. In 2002, 218 students were enrolled in Victorian universities. In 2006, although it says there 'an estimate of 78', I can tell you that the actual figure was 77. It was an actual drop-off of 60 per cent in young people participating in the higher education sector. We can also see that Battersby, as reported before, in the Mallee region is 23 per cent in terms of participation.

One of the critical areas I want to talk to this committee about is mentioned on page 8. That relates to performance by young people. You will notice that I have looked at three different schools — obviously I have not identified those schools — where the dux or VCE results have dropped off quite dramatically, nearly all in the one location. You can see that aspiration is having a significant impact in terms of student performance. I could also have put in the data that sits underneath the dux, and they, too, have compressed quite dramatically over the last three to four years.

That probably paints the picture. Therefore, in 2005 we have confirmed the issues of high deferral rates amongst young school leavers — and we have been working on this issue for around about four years — and the significant upskilling requirements of industry.

In the region the strong acceptance, 51 per cent of students were surveyed in 2005 in relation to whether they would accept a community or blended model in years 11 and 12. By the way, this is not about all young people. There is a significant cohort, as we have seen from the data, of people who need to stay in the region because of their financial situation but also because of their connectedness to the community, family reasons et cetera. So this push is not about all young people staying in a region; that would be silly. We need young people to move on; we need young people to have experiences; and as I said before, we need young people to come back.

The model as determined by the Mid-Murray higher education working party was the Central Murray flexible learning hub. Basically what we were looking at there was a whole range of flexible delivery in terms of, maybe, first-year courses — and I know this inquiry has heard a lot about articulated courses between TAFE and university players. This would avoid infrastructure or capital outlays, something that we have to try to keep to a minimum. We also need to increase industry partnerships. Other areas that we would look are research, and I know the Mid-Murray higher education working party did a research prospectus in the region. That goes hand in hand when we are talking about universities coming to the region or being viable in the region.

The flexible learning hub would be managed by a facilitator, and that facilitator would look for the demand in the particular courses within the region but also work with industry in the community within the region to help develop the demand, as was asked about before. I think probably 60 EFTU places is probably close to the mark.

The hub would function as a resource of information for the community, and as I said before, to develop community and industry networks. It would be based around a shop front or innovations-type centre within the Swan Hill region in the first instance but also have a relationship, as we have heard before, with the Kerang Learning Centre. It is interesting to note that Kerang itself is a significant service town for probably around about 10 000 people as well, so it is a significant presence and it needs some form of higher education within that community.

We looked at a partner university, and at this stage may I point out that we have had significant discussions with La Trobe University. They have been fantastic in relation to this type of approach at the present time. We have done some significant work with La Trobe and also Sunraysia Institute of TAFE, particularly around articulation processes and courses to be offered, particularly in the Swan Hill region. Therefore we are talking about providing a significant stimulus to the economic development of the region and also to help, as I said before, the research that is desperately needed in this part of Victoria.

May I make a bit of a political comment here in relation to the CSIRO. One of the issues associated with the closure of that facility at Merbein is having role models within the community — those 22 or 32 scientists. That is a significant issue for the community. We need to have more of those role models in the community so that our young people can aspire to the opportunities that exist out there. However, there might be other opportunities for this type of flexible learning hub to link up with the Birchip Cropping Group, which has a fantastic record in relation to research within this region.

The third thing I want to talk about is again the aspirations of young people in the secondary system. You have heard already from Professor Larkins of Monash University that in areas of social disadvantage the university is trying to work with years 8, 9 and 10 students. This is very true, and it is something that needs to be done for the community in terms of the pathways for young people.

I was lucky enough to go to Tasmania to have a look at attitudinal change on the west coast of Tasmania, around the Cradle Coast, and one of the initiatives that the Tasmanian government has done is called the Tasmanian government's Guaranteeing Futures initiative. What they have done there is put in pathway planners.

For that reason I will be suggesting to this committee a trial in the Swan Hill, Kerang and maybe Robinvale clusters of employing three pathway planners to try and stimulate young people in years 8, 9 and 10, in relation to career pathway aspiration et cetera. They would be located in an innovation centre — in other words, where they had access to industry, and also to the LLEN, the local community partnership, which is a federal-funded initiative, and other youth brokering agencies. The idea would be that they case manage around 320 young people, but do it three

and four times a year, in terms of their attributes, their employability skills, and their awareness of career; they would have previous industry experience or would have worked in the employment sector.

The fourth thing that the working party would like to refer to this particular government inquiry is in relation to — and I know you have heard it a lot before — the youth allowance. There is a clear correlation between regional participation in post-secondary education, and the ability to survive. We have significant deferral rates. I think when we first started looking at this in 2004, there was in this region around an 18 per cent deferral rate, and it stood out for this particular region. But in that period of time, right across regional Victoria, there has been a whole range of schools now experiencing young people deferring at alarming rates: in actual fact I think there may be eight or nine LLENs that have now got together in terms of looking at some research that may be carried out.

The On Track data reveals that in 2004, of 224 students that deferred, 28 per cent were not in study the following year, and 16 per cent of those did not return to study in 2006. Obviously the danger is whether these young people will come back into the training. We would ask the Victorian government to lobby the federal government to make changes to the independent youth allowance because it is a federal jurisdiction, to make it easier for rural and remote students to access this support.

Just in the appendices, in terms of where we have come from probably over the last six or seven months, as I have said before, we have worked extremely closely with the Sunraysia Institute of TAFE and also La Trobe University in looking at articulated pathways, particularly in the Swan Hill region. At the moment we do have one, which is the early childhood development diploma, moving into a bachelor of education, primary. There has been some significant work done on that and that is already occurring, and that articulation process has been signed off, and Kent from La Trobe uni will talk a little more about that later on.

We are also investigating the possibility of a community-based accounting practicum. In other words, that we have local industry involved in being mentors, CPAs, who would come together to provide a practicum for young people, and also up skilling.

I suppose there is also an issue here around the Monash medical information that you will hear tomorrow. It is a similar model in terms of having the young people who come from this region being trained in this particular area. That has been quite successful, and next year, for example, four doctors will be trained in Swan Hill and two in Kerang for a 12-month period. We have also been in discussions with La Trobe around the establishment of a Swan Hill clinical school and school of nursing and midwifery. However, these things take time and they take facilitation or seeding. At the moment obviously most of the university's money comes from the federal government, and about 1 per cent will come from the Victorian government. It is an opportunity for the Victorian government to seed some of these innovative opportunities in communities such as Swan Hill, Wangaratta, Seymour and Frankston. Therefore the working party would ask this inquiry to look closely at this concept. We are talking about maybe \$200 000 for three years to be able to seed the feasibility of these flexible hubs. The issue, however, is about broadband and it is about the ability of that flexibility to be brought into the region.

When we talk about a community or blended model, we are talking about an e-learning, web-based model; we are also talking about intensives, we are also talking about that tutorial support that I talked about before, of local intellect, and this is a solution about local people coming together and being able to solve some of these issues. I will leave it at that.

**Mr HERBERT** — Thank you very much, Glenn, for your presentation. It is very detailed. Can I just clarify, firstly, that you thought that around about 60 HECS effective full-time units was about the mark? Is that 60 per annum or quantum? Sixty per annum is a couple of hundred at any one time.

**Mr STEWART** — I think in the Webb report we talk about it building up to 150 effective full-time units over a period of time; because the issue is that obviously it is not just setting up for one year. We have to set this sort of strategy up for seven years to make it viable for the university to be able to deliver in the region, so 20 in the first-year, and then moving through to 60.

**Mr HERBERT** — Thank you. Also, one of the issues on flexible hubs, which you have mentioned quite a few times, is how suitable they are. If you can get Telstra broadband all happening pretty well — and there have been problems with that — but if you can get the technology right, one of the questions is: is it a suitable form of learning for some of the areas of skills shortages? I noticed in the shire's presentation earlier that we have skills shortages in dairying, engineering, accounting, and a whole range of them. Some of those, I would have thought,

would be very difficult to learn in the flexible learning setting. Doctors — I can see it working for. You do a few years and then spend a year or two out in the communities learning for the last year or two. Nursing — the same. But I just wonder how realistic is a flexible learning-type centre to meet the skill needs of this area.

**Mr STEWART** — We have debated this and looked at it pretty closely over the last three or four years, and for some people the distance ed or flexible nature of the web-based issue can be quite daunting. What we are talking about is the supported model, and that is that within the community we establish these mentoring banks of people who are able to provide some expertise. Okay, they may need to be remunerated, but I think from my background as a teacher that the innovative model that is being looked at now in the north-west of Victoria is around a community-based practicum where for four years those students are actually placed into a mentoring network within that region, and they move around that, and then they might do intensives away from that. That is the Deakin @ Your Doorstep model. I think that there is some possibility about that, and they have done some significant research around that, in terms of its viability. I think, particularly in the area of teaching, and being a former practitioner, I wish I had had more time out in the field, particularly with the changing cohort of young people that we have at the moment, in terms of their learning styles and their needs.

I think being out there longer, in terms of being out there in on-the-job training, will probably produce a better outcome. From the accountancy point of view, there is a firm in Swan Hill that already has a significant mentoring capability within their practice, but maybe in terms of a broader picture, this is an opportunity. We are going to be 500 teachers short in northern Victoria and the north-west, according to the *Age* of two weeks ago. That will have a significant and dramatic effect in these sorts of communities where we will struggle to get teachers, so we have to come up with innovative ways of doing it.

**The CHAIR** — Can I ask you, Glenn, about the Central Murray universities centre concept? How far have you got down the track in trying to implement this, and I suppose the other part of the question is: you modelled it on the Geraldton model. How have they gone in Geraldton with their implementation?

**Mr STEWART** — I did try to ring Geraldton the other day to see how far they have gone, but I do know that they did have somewhere in the vicinity of 200 students studying there. That was about 12 months ago. They did eventually go for a campus-type structure, which I think was probably a wrong move because of the capital outlay there.

But I think it has been reasonably successful, from what I can gather. I think there are three universities. They have a senior partner of the university, if you like, and they have the other two universities delivering their — but to be honest, Geoff, I have not followed that up of late. However, Broken Hill were looking at doing the same as this and stole some of the operational nature of what we were talking about in the Broken Hill university centre. Other communities are looking at this type of concept.

**The CHAIR** — But in terms of where you are at here, it is still very much a concept and you are talking to a range of parties?

**Mr STEWART** — No, we have probably progressed a little bit further than that with La Trobe and Sunraysia in terms of articulation. La Trobe has been fantastic in terms of coming to the party to look at the opportunities there. But we still have a way to go. It is difficult for La Trobe, given the pressure that is on them in terms of the financial viability of regional campuses. Some sort of support would not go astray, I think, on their behalf. But they can talk on that a little bit later on.

**Mr KOTSIRAS** — What have been the problems? What are the difficulties? The centre was meant to start in 2007, I understand.

**Mr STEWART** — It is probably fair to say that in terms of where we have been — we have had to enter into more discussions with Sunraysia and La Trobe. These things do take a while to develop; there is a fairly strong bureaucracy that you have to work through. These models were a little bit innovative in terms of where the university partners were, or partner. We have been working through those issues. There has obviously been a restructure in relation to, say, La Trobe University, so there have been some significant things to work through. But we have gained some momentum in the last six to eight months, which is great; however, we would need some facilitation or extra help in relation to actually getting this model on the board.

**The CHAIR** — Can I come back to one further issue? I know we are getting on with time. I refer to the issue of deferrals that you have raised and that others have raised in our other hearings. I think that essentially there does need to be a lot more research done, as you say. But have you seen any research that clarifies further downstream what the experience has been, and whether it has been bad? Some students might say it has been good having a year off and that their results have been good when they have started university with a greater sense of growth or work experience behind them, or whatever. But I am interested to know what other inclination you might have looked at that might have helped assess the effect of deferrals?

**Mr STEWART** — Geoff, that is the focus of the LLEN study at the moment in terms of deferment, talking to those individuals about why they have deferred. There is a lot of evidence to suggest a gap year for young people, to have that 12-month period off. The issue probably for rural students is that that could potentially be quite dangerous. I have not seen enough research on that to be able to appropriately answer that question, Geoff, but there is a gut feeling that for some students they may then not come back into formal higher-education-level study.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you, Glenn. We had better keep moving on so that we can hear from Swan Hill College.

**Witness withdrew.**

# CORRECTED VERSION

## EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

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

Robinvale — 2 June 2008

#### Members

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

Chair: Mr G. Howard

Deputy Chair: Mr N. Kotsiras

#### Staff

Executive Officer: Ms K. Ellingford

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

Administrative Officer: Ms N. Tyler

#### Witnesses

Mr S. Kelly, acting principal,  
Mr R. Johnson, careers pathways manager,  
Ms S. Ryan, year 11 student, and  
Mr L. Mitchell, year 9 student, Swan Hill College.

**The CHAIR** — Welcome to Swan Hill College. It is good to see that as well as having you, Shane, as acting principal we also have some students and another teacher. You have a good balance to present to us and we are certainly looking forward to the contribution that you are able to make about issues of participation in tertiary education.

**Mr KELLY** — Thank you, Chair. The actual presentation will be very brief, because we have largely brought the kids along for you to question and to ask for their opinions. Rob Johnson is our careers pathways manager; Sophie is a year 11 student; and Lachie is a year 9 student. We have not worded them up, so I am not quite sure what their aspirations or plans for the future are.

Just in terms of Swan Hill College, over the 15 years that I have been there — I came to Swan Hill College in 1993, I think it was, as a year 12 manager — I have certainly noticed a dramatic decline in interest in tertiary study. Associated with that is a lack of interest, or a declining interest, in professional occupations amongst the students right across the board. In terms of accessing tertiary education, we know there are issues — financial issues, drought-related issues, geographical issues and social issues — and no doubt you have heard about those from previous presentations as you have been travelling around the state. However, we at Swan Hill College have come to the conclusion that the key issue in this lack of interest in tertiary education and professional occupations is a cultural factor: simply a lack of aspiration on the part of our students to move on to — not so much more serious, but — the professional occupations and careers. Many of those issues are social issues. I believe in Swan Hill and district there is a lack of a community commitment to higher education and higher occupations, if you like. The statistics show that in our area there is certainly a declining number of professional careers among the family body that makes up our schools, so there is a lack of role models.

The other issue that has impacted upon us has been the government's focus — quite rightly — on skill shortage areas. Over the recent years our school has become one of the biggest VET schools in northern Victoria. We have got a school population of just over 1000; 250 of those kids are doing vocational programs in years 10 and 11. There has been a real pendulum swing to meet the skill shortages and to a focus on the VET programs within our school, but of course that has had an impact upon those students who are interested in the para-professional occupations and moving on to tertiary studies. I think the pendulum has certainly moved too far in one direction, and we are looking at ways and means to move that pendulum back to a more realistic outcome for students.

In my early years as a year 12 manager we had a student population of 140 at year 12; our student population at year 12 is now down to about a bit over 100 this year and a bit under 100 last year. In the early years we used to get about a 60 per cent to 70 per cent VTAC application rate among the year 12s; now it is dramatically less than that — Rob has some statistics — 30 per cent. That is just an indication of the change.

**The CHAIR** — Can I just ask: in the same time that your year 12 population has gone down from 140 to 100, what has the overall school population done? Has that stayed relatively stable around the 1000? Or has it gone up?

**Mr KELLY** — No, when I first came back up here we had a school population over two campuses of about 1400; we are now down to about 1000 — 1014 to be precise — at the moment.

**The CHAIR** — So the relativity is about the same, then, in terms of the school population and year 12s?

**Mr KELLY** — Yes, probably, although there is the fact that out of the year 12s we used to have a 60 to something or other per cent VTAC application rate and now that has halved, which is what I was saying.

**The CHAIR** — Yes, thanks.

**Mr KELLY** — The swing to the trades is something that we need to address as a whole community, and you have heard about the economic issues associated with that. As to how we address that, I heard Glenn talking about various options that the LLEN has put together in its paper. We certainly support that. We think there needs to be some local factor, because it is very hard to persuade kids to move and start thinking tertiary, start thinking para-professional, when it is so easy to do a vocational program, do a pre-apprenticeship program, go to TAFE — get your instant job, if you like, get your instant reward, as opposed to doing the hard yards and going off to university.



I think we need something that, particularly in the early years of a tertiary opportunity, is more local, otherwise it is very difficult for pathways managers like Rob to convince kids that there are longer term rewards there if you put in the hard yards of three or four years — and Rob will take you through some of that data in a minute. Some of the issues that the kids face are: making the break, leaving town, doing the hard yards, and taking on a HECS debt over four years. We all live in a pre-temporal society these days and kids and families want fairly short-term instant rewards, and they are the issues that we are facing. That is about it for me. We have passed around some data which you have got. Rob would be quite happy to take you through and explain some of the issues associated with that.

**Mr JOHNSON** — All right, we will see how we go. Just with that graph, that is based on students who actually attempted but not necessarily completed year 12 in 2007, so that is about 94 students for last year. The 65 per cent — the big chunk of that graph that is represented there, and I wanted to make sure it was there — is basically students undertaking apprenticeships, both full-time and part-time employment, as well as seeking employment, which is not really the focus of this current inquiry but I just wanted to make a mention of what they were.

**The CHAIR** — You have not got any sense of how many are still in that seeking employment category? I think it is relevant.

**Mr JOHNSON** — It is usually around the 4 to 5 per cent mark from year to year. I do not have accurate information on how that is at this point in time so that there is just a summary based on prior calls and prior information we have got. The rest of that graph is something we have actually chased up in the last two or three weeks to find out what has happened with our students this year who have started some sort of university or post-school study. The continuing study locally — —

**Mr KOTSIRAS** — Sorry, have you done this for previous years as well, 2005–06?

**Mr JOHNSON** — That is the downside. This is only my second year in this role — —

**Mr KELLY** — He is reasonably new to the school.

**Mr JOHNSON** — so this is the first time I have done this. I would love to have that because it would provide some background. I think there is good reason to believe it is pretty similar from year to year based on the anecdotal stuff I have had from families.

The continuing study locally is at the local TAFE and generally tends to be pre-apprenticeship-type opportunities as well as a little bit around community services; that might be children or nursing-type opportunities. Continuing study away obviously includes Melbourne, Bendigo, Ballarat university-type opportunities that kids are continuing with. I am particularly interested in the deferred, left uni and ‘homesick wants to leave’ categories. Where I have put ‘Homesick wants to leave’, that is students who have specifically said, ‘My plans right now are to complete this semester and quit’. So they want to complete the semester, get it done, and then go away and maybe come back to it later, but they are really not sure how they are going to go or what they are going to do about that. Others, that 5 per cent there, have just plain left uni, so they have just dropped out of the system already. Deferred students are either students who defer as a result of going in and applying through VTAC and deciding to defer or students who may have commenced this year and decided to leave early enough that that was an opportunity that they still had available.

When I look at that graph, what I am seeing straightaway — and you guys will be seeing the same time — is that about half of our students who apply to university are not lasting the first semester. On top of the low numbers that we actually have applying, we have got low numbers continuing, and that is a serious concern for me as a careers and pathways manager in the school because I am trying to work with students to help them increase opportunities and feel like opportunities are viable. But over 50 per cent of the message coming back that spends most of its time in the community is that, ‘University is a very, very hard thing to do and we do not think it is a very viable thing to do because we have been, we have tried it, we are coming back and saying no’. Quite often families will have that link to a student who has gone off and had this sort of opportunity available and has not survived it. It is a very challenging thing.

There is a range of factors that come up. The first one that always comes up is financial, and you guys have probably heard enough about that so I will not talk any more about that. Certainly, there are emotional factors in

having to leave home to go and pursue these studies. I will give you the example of one particular student — I have been speaking to a parent recently — who is studying alternative medicines down at Melbourne University. She is staying on campus. She thought staying on campus would be the right decision so that she could make links and start to develop friends and start to fit in. She expected that there would be a lot of regional students on campus because who else is going to want on-campus accommodation?

The fact is that when she got down there, that on-campus accommodation is full of people from Melbourne. They have got families and friends and all these other things that they link into. All these friendship groups come in together into this on-campus accommodation and the regional student is left isolated, and she is one of the ones who is actually planning to leave at mid-year. Then you obviously have got the adjustment into college life, which every student has to deal with. I think I might leave it there just as a brief summary. If you have got any other questions, just feel free.

**The CHAIR** — It would be good to hear from Sophie and Lachlan. Perhaps we will go to Sophie first. We would be interested to know, first of all, what your plans for the future are, and why, I suppose?

**Ms RYAN** — My plans for the future are to get a law degree and I am trying to pursue that area. I like journalism more though. Either way, I do not mind. I am not sure which way I really want to go at the moment. The biggest concern is there are not heaps of options in the area surrounding Swan Hill. You cannot get down to Melbourne so often and all that and you cannot go to all the discussions and all that stuff.

**The CHAIR** — What is your view about what your first priority would be in terms of going on to tertiary education? Where would you go at the moment?

**Ms RYAN** — At the moment I would like to go into law and I would like to go down to the Deakin campus in Geelong.

**The CHAIR** — What has helped you to form that decision?

**Ms RYAN** — I have family down there, which is pretty much the main reason why I am going down there. Hopefully.

**The CHAIR** — Okay, so there is family down there. You are in year 11 at the moment. How many other students are there in year 11?

**Mr KELLY** — About 150.

**The CHAIR** — About 150 in year 11. How many of your friends do you think are also talking about going on to tertiary education?

**Ms RYAN** — A few are but then there are heaps that seem to go, ‘No, not uni, why would I go to uni? It is easier to get an apprenticeship, it is easier to drop out now and get full-time work rather than going down to uni’. Not all of them are going down and most of them have not even thought about that idea because it seems too far out for them.

**The CHAIR** — Can I ask what are the other jobs that they are considering as alternative jobs that are quite okay?

**Ms RYAN** — Most of them are looking for trades like mechanics, hairdressing and all that kind of stuff where they can get the apprenticeship and start work now rather than going off and getting a degree or something and then coming back.

**The CHAIR** — All right. We will move on to Lachlan for his perspective, and then the others will all get a chance to talk to you. What are your plans, Lachlan?

**Mr MITCHELL** — I plan on going to RMIT in Melbourne to study something in the field of engineering, something computer-based.

**The CHAIR** — What has helped you to form that view?

**Mr MITCHELL** — Well, I am pretty good at using computers and I like engineering and things in that field, and there is good money.

**The CHAIR** — Okay. I guess the question to both of you is do your parents have university backgrounds?

**Mr MITCHELL** — No, not my parents, but a lot of my family has been to university and they have given me positive feedback.

**The CHAIR** — But your parents have not.

**Mr MITCHELL** — My parents have not, no.

**The CHAIR** — Okay. And you, Sophie?

**Ms RYAN** — Pretty much no-one in my family has been to uni.

**The CHAIR** — So you would be the first.

**Ms RYAN** — Yes.

**The CHAIR** — On to the others!

**Mr KOTSIRAS** — Can I ask you now — ignore the fact that your principal and your careers teacher are here — to perhaps think about previous years. Was the careers advice that you received from school worthwhile? Did students receive worthwhile and up-to-date information about courses offered at university, or do you think more needs to be done in that area because this school does not offer you information that you require? Lachlan first.

**Mr MITCHELL** — Not so much myself as I am in year 9, but as you get into year 10 they have different presentations from the universities and stuff to go to and information on the universities. That is mostly for the upper years.

**Mr KOTSIRAS** — Okay. Sophie?

**Ms RYAN** — I found from a younger year, around year 7 and year 8, there was not much. You did not really hear about it, and the classes that we did have on careers were always being mucked around with other students who did not want to be there so it was really quite pointless. Now I find as I am in year 11 and moving on to year 12 there are more options and we are able to find out about careers, but there is still not much time when you can sit down and just have one-on-one conversations and ask heaps of questions.

**Mr KOTSIRAS** — Do the universities or the TAFE come into the school to give you some information on what courses they provide?

**Ms RYAN** — There are pamphlets and that but you can —

**Mr KOTSIRAS** — It is not face-to-face?

**Ms RYAN** — Yes, there is really not much interaction with unis as most of them are further away.

**Mr JOHNSON** — To cover that just a little bit further from where Sophie is at, we have people from the Bendigo campus of La Trobe University come up, and the student recruitment officer there does tend to spend a bit of time through the year when she comes up and does presentations. That generally tends to be lunchtime sessions for students who are specifically interested because we do not want to detract from the information session for the kids. Other than that, it is sort of whatever we can get when we get it. One of the big issues that I have at the moment is I feel like our students are very disconnected from what uni really is. They do not get in the door often enough. It is not something that is really in our community as an issue to even be raised let alone be thought about as part of our culture, so it is something I need to work on.

**Mr KOTSIRAS** — As a careers teacher, you advise on what scholarships are available from the university?

**Mr JOHNSON** — They bang down our door about them, and I encourage them to. There is lots of research that the students can do individually. We help them with start-off points of where to start looking and all that sort of thing, making them aware of SEAS through the VTAC applications that you can put in to get the commonwealth scholarships as well as the industry-based ones, and advising them to get into the universities and check out all the different academic-based ones as well. We do a bit to make students who are interested aware, but we have to build the interest first.

**Mr HERBERT** — Thank you for your presentations, one and all. My question goes to that central point — different communities have different workforce needs, different economic needs. I wonder if it is such an unusual thing or a big issue that young people are going into trades. The trades have good wages nowadays — very good wages; I wanted my son to go into one. Skill shortages tend to mean they will get jobs straightaway. Kids like anyone else can see where the jobs are, where the opportunities are, where the wages are. I wonder whether it is such a large issue in terms of students moving towards the trades rather than universities. I wonder if the issue is not more making sure there are pathways if they then want to up-study and get further qualifications going into that. I just throw that to you.

**Mr KELLY** — I think it comes back to the school culture thing in a way, though, if you have far in excess kids doing VET programs than doing academic programs. The kids who are doing vocational programs are in the normal academic classes as well. There is therefore a culture of not striving to do your absolute very best because you do not need to. The other thing is we have, as I said, a very big VET program. We have got 150-odd kids studying certificate II in automotive in Swan Hill. If every garage in Swan Hill appointed an apprentice every year, that is six kids. We are creating oversupply in the trades, and there is quite clearly an undersupply in the para-professional areas. You cannot get an accountant in Swan Hill — I am sure these other people have told you, and you have got all the statistics. That is what I think: I think the pendulum has moved too far. We are now creating an oversupply in one area and we have got an undersupply in the other area. When in a whole school you have got 100 kids in year 12 and a limited number of them are focused on real success, high ENTER scores to get into university, that has a cultural negative on the performance of the whole cohort of kids.

**The CHAIR** — Can I follow that up a bit too? I am wondering with your school, I thought I saw statistics when I was looking earlier on that a number of the schools in this region have a lower than average participation rates in the higher levels of year 11 and 12. I am wondering whether that is not part of the issue — that in fact they all should be moved up the scale so some of those going on to apprenticeships might have been the ones you more expected to go on to tertiary. I am wondering about those students who are not going on to year 10. What percentage do you have who are not even completing year 10, for example? What is the issue with those students?

**Mr KELLY** — The percentage going to year 10 — the percentage of loss, lack of retention, at year 10 is not very high at all. We do have a retention issue from year 11 to 12. A great number of our kids have finished their certificate II level program by the end of year 11 and therefore are straight in the apprenticeship and job market. They have no aspiration to go on to year 12, let alone to do well in year 12. That becomes the cultural negative for us, for our teachers.

**The CHAIR** — But there is not an unemployment issue then. There is not a number of students who are leaving school who then are not getting ongoing employment.

**Mr JOHNSON** — I would actually say there is not an unemployment issue when kids leave the school. The issue is, if you look at the gap at around the age of 25, what young people are actually in employment. There is actually a significant issue around people around 25 becoming unemployed. Part of the graphs that you were asking about before was seeking employment. It probably is only about 5 per cent seeking employment when they finish year 12. Out of that, about half of that 60 per cent would actually have received employment without any further education or training. Those people are likely to be the ones who are chewed up and spat out by your retailers because, you know, 'I have got what I need out of this person. I am now looking for the next young person to come and fill their shoes'.

**The CHAIR** — That is a very good point. Is that message that you are taking back into the school, for example?

**Mr JOHNSON** — Absolutely.

**The CHAIR** — But they would not be the ones who have completed apprenticeships, surely. They would be the ones who are going on to unskilled work.

**Mr KELLY** — They are a lot of the kids who go through the vocational program, and they do not have an opportunity to become a motor mechanic just because they have got their certificate II in automotive, so they just take a job. They appear in that graph there as well.

**Mr JOHNSON** — I can recite a student who has left at the end of year 11 expecting to get an apprenticeship — did not get the apprenticeship. He is now working at one of the pizza shops part-time at night and working at Dimmeys. That is what he is doing in the meantime to fill the gap. It is not an uncommon thing.

**The CHAIR** — That is the interesting issue, from my point of view. It is getting those ones to go on to tertiary. You are saying they are actually going on to quite good jobs in the trades, but then there is the other group who are obviously not getting up any skill.

The last question I want to ask both Lachlan and Sophie — sorry, you will just have to wait a little bit longer for lunch.

**Mr KOTSIRAS** — Martin has got a question.

**The CHAIR** — He has not waved his hand at me yet. Martin can have his question first.

**Mr DIXON** — After you; you are on a roll.

**The CHAIR** — You have both said you would like to go on to tertiary. Is there an issue that you have been worried about whether your parents can afford for you to go on to tertiary? Is that something in the back of your mind, or are you comfortable in your circumstances that there is an option and that your parents can afford it?

**Ms RYAN** — No, finance is my biggest issue about going on to tertiary study. I am not sure I will have enough money or anything to get into it. HECS, I am not sure if that will work.

**Mr MITCHELL** — I am fairly comfortable with finance at the moment. It should be all right. I will be taking out a HECS loan anyway when I go to university.

**Mr JOHNSON** — I would like to address that question shortly. We actually discussed this at one of our school council meetings with parents who were thinking about university and all that sort of thing. One of the issues they raised was parent belief on whether or not students should go on, whether or not they can afford it. She sort of raised that if the kids are aware that their parents cannot afford it, does that mean the kids are probably not even looking at it because they know their parents are not going to be able to afford it?

**The CHAIR** — Hence the reason for the question. What was the feedback?

**Mr JOHNSON** — The feedback was that maybe some parents are not deliberately but in some sort of way are subversively affecting students' minds around going on to further study. She actually thought that she may have actually done that herself.

**Mr DIXON** — I supposed mine is just following on. Rob, do you see it as part of your role to educate the community and educate parents about the realities of going away to study and so that they are making informed decisions.

**Mr JOHNSON** — Yes.

**Mr DIXON** — Obviously, when you see the numbers who try it and just cannot — —

**Mr JOHNSON** — Throw their hands up in the air?

**Mr DIXON** — Yes. Obviously that pre-education is important. Do you see that as part of your role as well or the school's role, too?

**Mr JOHNSON** — Absolutely — from both the student and parent perspective. I have looked at a program, I think it is run down the Mornington Peninsula through the Brotherhood of St Laurence. It is something

called PACTS (Parents as Career Transition Support). I am very interested in trying to get it going but, once again, community attitudes and stuff have sort of stopped that from getting any sort of active participation out of the parents to actually get it running. I am hoping to, when I can actually get a group together willing to take it on. It is something that could grow over a period of time. We do look at those sorts of programs with parents and then also programs around students and a few programs on the run we are about to start soon.

**Mr DIXON** — Sophie has obviously thought about it, so that is good news.

**The CHAIR** — Any further questions?

**Mr ELASMAR** — We are late for lunch anyway. In relation to the deferral issue, parents push their kids to the furthest because of the financial issue. Kids are aware and parents are aware that if they defer they might not return. We heard before that such people did.

**Mr JOHNSON** — I try to get around to all the year 12s to be aware of the choices they are making and whether or not they are thinking they will defer. I talk through the pros and cons of deferring with them — the financial aspects. If they can go and work for a period of time and earn enough money then that might get them classified as an independent student, which is great, but the other side of that is the numbers of students who just plain do not go back once they do earn that income around deferral. It is something we discuss as much as possible with the year 12s as they leave the school. But facts are it is very hard. They see a hell of a lot of barriers there for them. They are aware of the barriers, because they have people coming back into the community telling them about the barriers, which makes it all feel very hard for them.

**Mr HERBERT** — I have one further quick question. Indigenous students, on the chart we had before, males 15 to 19, have 20 per cent attendance in education. I would have thought that is a pretty startling statistic when you look across the region. What do you in your school, (a), to keep indigenous students at school, and what do you think should be done; and (b), are there any programs in terms of trying to break that cultural gap and get some indigenous students into para-professional and university courses?

**Mr KELLY** — We have been reasonably successful. We have got about 65 Koori students in our school at the moment — 3 or 4 in year 12. One of our school captains is actually Koori, one of our house captains is Koori. We have considerable success once we can get the kids passed about year 9, but we have a real struggle to retain them in about those middle years, years 9 to 10.

We do have some programs: the Wannik program, which you know all about, is being launched. We believe we will have some success. We applied for some funding through the Koori Justice program and that is going to come through in the next week or two, I believe, which will again put some more resources into actually getting those kids to school in the first place. The retention is an issue from years 9 to 10 or thereabouts. Once we get them through that barrier we generally have some reasonable success, and in fact kids go on to university and things like that.

**Mr HERBERT** — How many would have gone in the last 5 years, 10 years? About 7 per cent I think should be quite close.

**Mr KELLY** — Yes, we are working on closing the gap, but the gap is still there, and of course Koori kids get special entry conditions. We have had a couple who have gone to Adelaide. I would have to have my Koori educator here to give you all the details, but there have been a few.

**Mr HERBERT** — I am just wondering if you get them back to talk as role models in the school? Do you have an active program?

**Mr KELLY** — Yes, Wayne Walsh is back in town. He works with Koori Justice and he is one of our year 12 kids. We had a kid come back who is doing welfare in South Australia. He came back to school last year because he actually won a VCAL award in year 12, so he came back and talked to our kids.

**Mr HERBERT** — Does it work?

**Mr KELLY** — There is a little bit happening, but it is a very slow process.

**Mr JOHNSON** — One of our year 11s is actually successful in the Kwong Lee Dow young scholars program that Melbourne University is running too.

**The CHAIR** — Any other questions? If not, we will break for lunch and everyone here is welcome to have a bite with us. We are interested in having some more informal discussions with you over lunch. Before we break, Peter Crisp, I did recognise you earlier as being in here but when I looked up you had stepped out of the room. It is good to have you here as the local state MP too.

**Witnesses withdrew.**





# CORRECTED VERSION

## EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

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

Robinvale — 2 June 2008

#### Members

Mr M. Dixon

Mr N. Elasmarr

Mr P. Hall

Dr A. Harkness

Mr S. Herbert

Mr G. Howard

Mr N. Kotsiras

Chair: Mr G. Howard

Deputy Chair: Mr N. Kotsiras

#### Staff

Executive Officer: Ms K. Ellingford

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

Administrative Officer: Ms N. Tyler

#### Witnesses

Ms F. Harley, manager, Chances for Children, and deputy executive director, Mallee Family Care;  
and

Ms C. Timpano, student, LaTrobe University Bendigo.

**The CHAIR** — We will get under way at this point in time. We have got Chances for Children who have come to speak to us. I see there is a submission from Mallee Family Care that relates to what you are talking to us about. Welcome!

**Ms HARLEY** — Thank you very much. I am Fiona Harley, manager, Chances for Children and also deputy executive director, Mallee Family Care. With me is Catherine, who is a recipient of Chances for Children. She will speak about her experiences with the program. I will not go over anything that is in the submission we have put in, and I have provided some additional information that you do not really need now but I just thought may be useful.

**Mr KOTSIRAS** — Is this your submission?

**Ms HARLEY** — No, that is in relation to an evaluation done into the program.

**Mr KOTSIRAS** — The submission was the one we got previously.

**Ms HARLEY** — And the CD is actually in relation to the whole Chances for Children program, just something we very recently had finished.

Chances for Children was established in 2001 in north-west Victoria and south-west New South Wales. It covers the catchment area of Mallee Family Care, so it is across seven LGA areas. It is quite large. It was established in response to the social and economic disadvantage in the areas and therefore the capacity of young people to achieve their full potential. That came about, I guess, because 75 per cent of our population had incomes below \$26 000 a year, a third are dependent on pensions and benefits, and I guess you do not have to be Einstein to figure out therefore that the take-up rates for young people for university placements is very, very low, given that you have to travel, as Catherine has, to Bendigo to study, or to Melbourne or to Adelaide.

We do have a La Trobe campus and a TAFE campus in Mildura but the number of courses is limited. For a lot of young people that means if they want to study at tertiary level they have to leave their own community. That also then leads to the fact that in our community we have problems in having enough qualified people, so that we lack doctors, we lack nurses and we lack teachers. We lack all those professions that you need to make up a vibrant, strong community.

As I said, Chances was established in 2001 and the first year we sent five young people off to university. We have now sent around about 100 off to university. We currently have 69 studying throughout Australia. We have had them in Sydney, we have had one who studied space engineering — she has just finished — in Queensland. They are all over Australia; it depends on where their abilities are and the courses that they get into.

Along with that, and what Chances does is to provide financial support for these young people to be able to realise their ambitions. In 2008 our investment in our tertiaries is \$221 000, so it is a significant investment. Most of our tertiaries are in receipt of youth allowance as well and Chances is about making up the gap, so it is making up the difference. It is not a set amount for any young person. What we do is we look at what their income is and we look at what their costs are going to be, and we make up the difference. Sometimes they might have a part-time job, sometimes they might have family able to give a little bit, or whatever. We look at all that and we make up the difference so that they can actually manage to study and live away from home.

We have had 30 graduates so far in the seven years, which has been fantastic, and we are getting around 30 new applications each year. We have found we expected it to sort of flatten but it has not. It is still increasing each year, and that I think is because of the current economic situation we are finding in our community, basically due to the impact of drought. Families who would have been in a position to be able to put their children through university or pursue tertiary studies are not in that position now because of the drought and the downturn in the economic situation, so that has had an increased impact on our program and the need for it.

The funding for the program does not come from government. We have received really no government funding at all. Government thinks it is great and we certainly have had submissions to government. I actually worked with Terry Bracks to set up a replica program in the western suburbs. They did not get any government funding either.

**Mr KOTSIRAS** — Typical of this government, uncaring!

**Ms HARLEY** — Absolutely! Our funding basically comes from community support, so it is about communities investing in the future of their communities, and also from some philanthropic trusts and from some corporates. It is a battle each year to gain the funds that we need to be able to support the students who we need to support. The option we could have had was to go down the pathway of developing a corpus and just using the interest, but the need was immediate and we needed to act now. We could not give it 10 or 15 years until we had enough money in the bank just to spend the interest. A big part of our job is out there actually selling the program to get community support and to get funding.

The other thing that we found with kids going off to university, particularly from families that have struggled, is they have not had a lot of capacity or experience of being in a city or using public transport or any of those sorts of things. To actually go off to Melbourne and live, catch public transport and find your way around a university campus is a big ask for an 18 or 19-year-old who may never have been to Melbourne in their lives.

What we have done is to put in place a mentor program. We have established that in partnership with Ernst & Young in Melbourne and their young professionals are mentors for our first-year university students in Melbourne. We have just, since this year, now implemented that in Adelaide with Ernst & Young. In other communities we have mentors but we really just source those by word of mouth and by people we know.

We feel it is important to match our first-year students with mentors just to support them through that first year of living away from home, which can be really tough. And this year, with some funding from Foster's in the Community, we are about to start what we call industry-based mentoring, which is where we will link our second, third and fourth-year students back in their own community with a business, a profession they are studying. It might be in a law firm, in council, in an engineering department or whatever, and look at them having some work experience over that summer break, hopefully paid work experience because that will then be less burden on Chances for Children. It will give them an opportunity to, I guess, understand and get to know the profession they are studying, but also for that business and industry to have a look at a young person from their community, and we would hope that down the track that young person may then be offered a job in that business, and have them come back to their community.

We are very excited about that and are looking to build on it. We certainly do not see that the demand will go away, and we see this as important to the future of our communities. Thank you.

**Ms TIMPANO** — Good afternoon. I am Catherine. I am the representative of the fortunate students who have been and are part of this Chances for Children program. I have been with the program now for three years, and I came here today from Bendigo, in my study break, simply to voice my opinion and what I consider to be the opinion of most of the students who are part of this program.

It is a wonderful program, and I can confidently say that without the establishment of the Chances for Children scholarship and the dedicated and friendly team in this program, my dream of tertiary education at La Trobe University's pharmacy school would have been quite a struggle.

An important point to make is that people tend to forget that when you move away as a rural student to the metropolitan areas, you are not just moving away for an education, you are living there. There are so many other associated costs with that living. I suppose if I had to remember growing up in Mildura, seeing goals for my future as being a student, there were so many possibilities and I knew, however, that the prospect of a university degree was very possible. However, I knew, being a rural student, not only was I required to work to the best of my ability in order to achieve a place for myself at university, but also I was expected to move 400 kilometres away from home, 400 kilometres away from family and familiar places, but nevertheless it was during this process of my planning and perhaps confronting these possibilities, that the team at Chances stepped in with open arms and expressed their understanding with an offer to help.

Not only does this program assist with the associated costs of living away from home, but it also has other components as part of the program. It has a mentoring program, as Fiona has mentioned, which is just to ease students through the transition period of settling into the independent university lifestyle, from the home life. It is a vital support service, and integral to students' wellbeing. It is very hard for these students, as often they may need to be working part-time away from home and they rarely get to visit home because of the demands that study and work place upon them.

This leads me to this important thought: how can we justify allowing geographically isolated students to be at a disadvantage simply due to the lack of financial means in these hardworking and honest low-socioeconomic families? We are talking about students who come from families where a word like ‘budget’ has always been a part of the equation while growing up. We are dealing with students who would otherwise have found it near impossible to support themselves while studying away from home.

And we are impacting the future of those students, their dreams, their hopes and their journey to personal success. Chances makes our journey within reach. The scholarship carries a financial burden associated with moving away from home in the pursuit of a tertiary education. Chances fosters us through the difficult times as tertiary rural students.

I would like to make one last comment — that is, that an investment into this Chances for Children scholarship is an investment in the future, in the lives of tomorrow’s leaders. I feel so lucky to have achieved my dreams and to have been given the opportunity to inspire new hopes for my future. Thank you, ladies and gentlemen, for taking the time to listen to my perspective on the Chances for Children program.

**The CHAIR** — Thanks, Catherine. No doubt we have some questions to follow up on with you. I will start by asking: in terms of the financial support that is provided, you indicated that it would vary, depending on the circumstances of the students. From Catherine’s point of view, I am interested in approximately how much you are receiving from Chances for Children. What percentage does that cover and what percentage do you then still cover yourself?

**Ms TIMPANO** — In the past three years I think every year I have been given about \$3000. That probably takes off about a third of the cost associated with living away from home. I do get youth allowance, so that covers quite a bit of it. Any of the other costs are pretty much filled in by my working a lot of hours during my holidays when I come back home. I work at the local chemist and I also do other fill-in jobs to make up those costs. Hopefully I will be able to get a job in Bendigo to help with anything extra.

**The CHAIR** — You are studying in Bendigo; is that at La Trobe University?

**Ms TIMPANO** — At La Trobe University Bendigo.

**The CHAIR** — What course are you doing?

**Ms TIMPANO** — Pharmacy.

**Ms HARLEY** — I guess on average we find that most young people have a shortfall of around \$100 a week between what it actually costs them and what the youth allowance or whatever it is pays if they are living in college accommodation — which, for kids from up here, is probably the preferred option, particularly in that first year at university. If they are not, then the hurdles just get higher and higher of course. It can be much, much greater than that because some college accommodation, as you would be well aware, is very expensive. It can be \$12 000, \$15 000 a year.

**Mr DIXON** — Fiona, what is the average length of stay for a student on the program? And is the retention rate fairly high, with the mentoring and the obvious support? Do they tend to stick at it? When we were talking to Swan Hill College they were saying that the high numbers of students who leave tertiary education is because they just do not have the support and it is not what they expected.

**Ms HARLEY** — We undertake to fund a student at the level they require for the duration of their course. We reassess that at the beginning of each academic year, so we meet with them and redo their budget. In that first year often the financial support is high because often they are living in college accommodation, they are grappling with coming to terms with being at university and studying and university life, and often they do not have part-time work. That tends to be the higher year. After that we encourage them to get a part-time job, we encourage them to perhaps look at cheaper accommodation, but we always sit down with them and work out what the gap is that they need. Normally the first and second years are the highest years and then it tends to come down — unless they are in a course that has a lot of contact hours and working outside of that would be very difficult, such as medicine or something like that. With the drop-out rate, recently we looked at it and we are certainly less than what would be the norm for country kids who go away to university. I think it is because we do put in those support mechanisms with mentoring, and we keep in touch with them as well.

**Mr HERBERT** — Catherine, thank you very much. It sounds like a fantastic program. Earlier today we heard a little bit about aspirations. You obviously had a desire to do it. Could you outline for us: what school you went to, what made you want to go on to university, and what drove your aspirations?

**Ms TIMPANO** — Wow!

**Mr HERBERT** — Was it good counselling or was it something else?

**Ms TIMPANO** — Pardon? Good counselling?

**Mr HERBERT** — Or something else, yes.

**Ms TIMPANO** — Perhaps referring back to one of the first questions, initially I went to a secondary school that was close to home. I lived in Red Cliffs, which is a bit out from Mildura.

**The CHAIR** — What was the school?

**Ms TIMPANO** — The school was Red Cliffs Secondary College. But I then moved into town, into Mildura, to pursue perhaps just an education that was a little bit more flexible with my needs subject wise, careers counselling wise and that sort of thing. I got a scholarship and I was fortunate enough to be able to stay there.

**The CHAIR** — What school was that?

**Ms TIMPANO** — Sorry, that was St Joseph's College. I have always been encouraged to strive to the best of my abilities and pursue a tertiary education. I was interested in health food from a very young age and had explored the prospects of a health science tertiary education. I got into lots of workshops and decided I would pursue pharmacy. I was very fortunate to get in. I did not apply only in this state: I applied in three states, and I even applied in New Zealand. I left all my possibilities open because that was what I was determined to do. I was fortunate that the placement I got was only 400 kilometres away and not overseas.

**Mr HERBERT** — Are your parents in that area?

**Ms TIMPANO** — No.

**Mr HERBERT** — Have they done degrees in tertiary education?

**Ms TIMPANO** — No. My father lives in Melbourne and my mother lives here; they are divorced and have been for quite a few years — about 16 years. I grew up with my sister and my mother. My dad is in the science area. He did do tertiary education in Melbourne, but my mother did not. In that aspect, I think what drove a lot of my inspiration was seeing how hard she was working for us children to get the best opportunities that perhaps she was not able to receive. That did drive me a lot. I think that is what it was.

**Mr KOTSIRAS** — What would have happened if you had not received the scholarship, the grant?

**Ms TIMPANO** — What if I had not received it?

**Mr KOTSIRAS** — Yes.

**Ms TIMPANO** — I would have had to work from day 1 after I moved away. Considering that I am required to do up to 30 hours just in my teaching contact hours, plus having to put in all the studying time, that would have been impossible for me. I know for a fact that, especially in the couple of years after moving away from home, I found it quite a struggle even without working while I was away. I can imagine what it would have been like to have had the pressure of work as well. I did not have a car at the time, and so it would have been very, very difficult. I do not even know how I could have coped; possibly I would not have been able to cope, would have been put off by that and would have moved back.

**Mr KOTSIRAS** — Fiona, are you aware of any other scholarships interstate or overseas that are similar to yours?

**Ms HARLEY** — No. I have now worked with four communities to set up Chances for Children programs, or like programs. No, none that I guess are as flexible as these are. There are a lot of scholarship schemes

around, but a lot of those are based on ENTER scores, for example, or academic achievement; or there are set amounts of money, and all those sorts of things. This is probably the only one that I am aware of that is as flexible and creative as it is.

**The CHAIR** — How do you promote your program, Fiona, both with prospective applicants but also with the other side, the potential incoming agents, or funding agents?

**Ms HARLEY** — With our students we have two funding rounds a year, and application packs go out to every school with what we call referring professionals — because an application has to be made by a referring professional. It is quite a detailed process, but we are investing often significant community dollars in that young person, so we feel we have to know a lot about them. We certainly ask for a lot of detailed information in respect of their family background, and particularly the financial aspects of their family background — because we will not fund if we believe the family is in a position to fund it themselves. So we do that.

We certainly have received a lot of publicity through the local press. I go along and talk at careers nights. We have a quarterly newsletter that goes out to all the schools. We disseminate quite a lot of information around the program, and knowledge of it has certainly grown over the years, there is no doubt about that.

I guess the newsletters and the publicity we receive have also been an encouragement to community people to invest in the program. We have what we call our sustaining supporters program which is where individuals and small businesses commit to donate a minimum of \$1000 a year ongoing. That has been quite successful, although we have seen that some people have had to withdraw from that because of the current economic situation. We were up to around just over \$200 000 a year in pledged money through that but that is now down. We have probably had a loss of about \$30 000 in the last year. Often we send out reminder letters at this time of the year before the end of the financial year, and I predict that there will be quite a few others who either reduce the money that they can pay or will have to put on hold their pledge because of the circumstances. We have certainly talked to corporate clients, encouraging good corporate social responsibility, and we have been very lucky with trusts. The CD that you have got, which virtually explains how you would set up a Chances for Children program and what our program looks like, was funded by the Myer Foundation, through its furthering philanthropy program.

**The CHAIR** — Steve, you have another question?

**Mr HERBERT** — Yes, thank you. Just on that, one of the things in an application kind of process is that some schools are very good at it, some schools are not, and we find that there is not necessarily a match between those that are good at applying and pushing students and those where the need is. What is your distribution of schools like? Do you find that there are some schools that really push and others who do nothing, and do you do anything proactive to respond to that?

**Ms HARLEY** — We have found that in Mildura itself there are really three main referrers for our tertiary education providers: St Joseph's College, Mildura Senior College and Red Cliffs Secondary College. It was slow, I have to admit. The take-up rate in those early days was slow. Often we would have a young person or their family come directly to us and at times we would sit down with them and say, 'Well, who is there who can be the referring professional for you?' Most of the application the family can do themselves anyway because it is a lot about family background and those sorts of things. We would actually help them find someone. Careers teachers and school counsellors are usually fairly good and fairly willing to do that but often they can be faced with needing to do 15 or so applications, so it is a big ask.

The take-up has been a bit slower in the Swan Hill region but we have a very committed project worker down there who is spending quite a bit of time in the schools and spreading the word so we would be hopeful that that will increase the number of applications that we get from down now. That certainly is quite low in the southern end of the region compared to what it is in the northern end of the region. We continue to work on that and hopefully if a young person is finding that there is no-one who can do that referral for them, they can come and talk to us and we can look at creative ways of doing that and making that happen for them.

**Mr HERBERT** — Fantastic. Sounds great.

**The CHAIR** — Can I just check? Are you employed full-time by Chances now, Fiona?

**Ms HARLEY** — No, if only! No, I am not. I am actually probably about half-time, about 0.5 with Chances. My other job involves responsibility for all the client service programs for Mallee Family Care.

**The CHAIR** — Okay.

**Mr KOTSIRAS** — How much money would you require from the state government?

**Ms HARLEY** — I could probably spend as much as they could give me!

**Mr KOTSIRAS** — There are no full-time staff?

**Ms HARLEY** — No full-time staff?

**Mr KOTSIRAS** — At Chances for Children?

**Ms HARLEY** — No. I am 0.5. We have a mentor coordinator who is 0.8 but that is funded through the Ian Potter Foundation and some federal money through Local Answers that we received for that. We have a Chances for Children coordinator who is 0.6 and that is Mallee Family Care in-kind funding. At a staffing level, probably \$150 000 for staffing at Chances would be fantastic. For recipients' money, we are probably looking at anything up to \$300 000 a year.

**Mr KOTSIRAS** — We will see what we can do with the state government.

**Ms HARLEY** — That would be wonderful. Thank you.

**The CHAIR** — You are doing very well. It was good to hear from you both. I think we need to roll on since we have got Robinvale Secondary College here to speak to us. Thank you very much, and it does sound like an outstanding program and a great initiative to have started locally.





# CORRECTED VERSION

## EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

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

Robinvale — 2 June 2008

#### Members

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

Chair: Mr G. Howard

Deputy Chair: Mr N. Kotsiras

#### Staff

Executive Officer: Ms K. Ellingford

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

Administrative Officer: Ms N. Tyler

#### Witnesses

Mr K. Lee, principal,  
Mr P. Carnegie, careers coordinator,  
Mr S. Ilsley, year 11 coordinator and college council representative,  
Ms D. Vandenberg, teacher and welfare coordinator,  
Ms X. Hoyle-Holdsworth, school captain and year 12 student, and  
Mr M. Cimino, school captain and year 12 student, Robinvale Secondary College.

**The CHAIR** — It is terrific to have such a good group of people from Robinvale today. Kevin is principal and we have got three teachers.

**Mr LEE** — Three teachers: Peter Carnegie, who is our careers teacher; Scott Ilsley who is a representative from school council and teaches chemistry; and Dianne Vandenberg who is here as both a school teacher and a parent currently going through the process of putting students through university.

**The CHAIR** — Terrific. And we have got two students.

**Mr LEE** — They are our two school captains. I introduce Xana Hoyle-Holdsworth and Matthew Cimino.

**The CHAIR** — Great. We better get started then.

**Mr LEE** — I have got a sheet that I have prepared if I could just pass that on. There is a considerable amount of information on the sheet which we clearly will not get through here but I would just like to draw your attention initially to a couple of things. Robinvale Secondary College is a level 8 school, which means we are of a low socioeconomic background and a high proportion of students have a language background other than English. Our situation at the moment is that we have 209 families in the school; 101 of those families are on education maintenance allowance, which is a considerable number. We also have 28 racial groups represented in the school and the department of multicultural affairs tells us that we are the most multicultural school in Victoria.

I have included a table on that front page which basically demonstrates what our school-level data and programs like On Track are telling us. We have managed, from 2004–2007, to increase the percentage of students who attend university. We have also increased significantly to 20.7 per cent in 2007 the percentage of students who continue at TAFE. Our total number of students in continuing education as a percentage has risen from 25.5 in 2004 right through to 55.1 in 2007. Another highlight is that we have only had one student since 2004 who left school and was unemployed, and that was at year 12. That is our year 12 exit information.

On the following pages, I have just highlighted a couple of points which are of particular interest to us. The first one is about special entry, and it comes down to the definition that is applied not just through universities and TAFE but the definition applied to what constitutes rural, isolated or remote. The suggestion we make in there is that where we live we would not regard places like Geelong and Bendigo and Ballarat as rural.

We suggest that one of the things that could be considered is access to infrastructure and the ability to get somewhere. The situation we have in Robinvale is that we are too close to Mildura to be included in Swan Hill, which is the other way, but we are not close enough to Mildura to actually get there regularly and viably. There is an inherent cost for a family accessing La Trobe University or Sunraysia TAFE. The cost is whether we travel up there and live up there or whether we go to Melbourne or Adelaide.

I would like to raise the issue of accommodation and the commonwealth accommodation scheme. We were intending to put all of our students through that, but I cannot recall any student having qualified. I was just talking to one of the parents at school who has three children currently at university, and they fail to meet the family income test for that. In effect they are on a teacher's wage and maintaining four households because the children have gone to different universities for different courses and for different reasons.

There are a number of issues associated with regional universities, including the type of course that is being offered and the type of delivery that is being offered. There are assumptions about technology. I am aware that nursing, for example, at La Trobe in Mildura is offered with some of the units offered by telematics or videoconferencing out of Bundoora. The Mallee Track schools are right across Victoria, and include schools such as Murrayville, which is a fair way out. We experimented with videoconferencing and telematics for a number of years. We have the greatest problem convincing students to participate in it even to enhance their year 12 subjects. A student would rather choose a subject that they would not normally do rather than risk the process of videoconferencing. We trialled a process where we introduced the videoconferencing technology at year 9 so the students would then have a play around with it in the classroom and then expand it at year 10. By the time they got to year 12 it was our thinking that it would be second nature to them. That is not the case. Staff will not use it. In our view, from bittersweet experience, it simply does not work.

I will just make a couple of comments about work experience. Work experience affords students the opportunity of going out and experiencing a range of careers and a range of experiences. We support that. We have managed

individual pathways funding in the school, and it is one of the things I have got down here. From all the conversations I have had we use the MIPs funding for the purpose for which it was intended, and we top it up. We get our kids to university open days; we get them to careers presentations; we get them to all sorts of things. In conjunction with programs that are run in the school, their knowledge and their understanding and the built-in comfort zone that they have in being at TAFE or university is increased.

I will go to point 6. There is an assumption of continuing education in the community. There are a lot of assumptions that students and their parents want to go on to university, and that is simply not the case for us. We have had no student leave school for unemployment since 2004, and then it was only one student. Parents here offer significant cash incentives — the new car and all the rest of it — even though the student has a high TER score or ENTER score, in order to stay at home. The expansion of agriculture in the region has meant that jobs have been readily available to local people who want to go out and work. We have got cases of students now who are trying to battle their way through year 11 and year 12, but they are working 35 hours a week over on the farm or at the shop or in some business to some degree. Because of the working hours they are taking home better money than some of my beginning teachers were up until the government's adjustment to the teacher pay packet.

Culturally some of the families in the school aspire to better things. The Polynesians will tell you, and they have a little expression, that they do not want their children working under the sun or under the vines. But they do not have the knowledge or the understanding of how they can change that, and that is where the school plays a greater role. But they also do not see the benefit of putting their students through a four-year course at university. There is nothing in them that allows them to see that far in advance.

At point 7 I am suggesting that I know universities and TAFEs have orientation days. Our experience through school is that we would recommend transition days rather than orientation. Even though we are a year 7 to year 12 school we have a transition program from each year level — into year 7; year 7 into 8; 8 into 9 right through to year 11 into 12. It is not just about providing information in a nutshell and an explanation about how we run the school and how we run the year level, it is about developing a comfort zone and developing a familiarity with the culture for students on how that section of the school runs. As I mentioned, the MIPs funding has been absolutely excellent. If you have any sway over the state budget, that is one thing that should definitely stay in place, if not be expanded.

Each year we send year 11 students to Melbourne for a week of orientation and work experience, and that is one of the things which has helped us because we can get our students down there and they become familiar with it. We have a career coordinator, Peter, who works with all of the year 10 students. We put in a subject at year 10 which is work-related skills. Every student does work-related skills. I think Peter's experience in that and his familiarity with the area has led to a lot of what we used to call the SBNAs which is then translated into a willingness for students to move ahead. The other point is that I know the universities offer extension and enrichment programs to secondary schools. We do not take them up; they are just far too hard to administer, and the issue of travel is enormous.

On the last page I have six recommendations. The first one is about MIPs; the second one is about some additional funding or support for school-based apprenticeship initiatives, which I think is a stunningly good one, particularly for a small school. The third one is a statement that came from a school council meeting asking if we could encourage universities and some of the institutions to establish a sister city-type relationship with some of the rural schools, and to develop that relationship over a particular time. For example, if Robinvale Secondary College was attached somehow through magical strings to La Trobe University at Bundoora and Mildura, the relationship would be established. We would have points of contact, we would have exchange visits and we would have all sorts of things — which we do with our sister city in France.

I make the point about access to facilities because rural schools are notoriously underresourced in some key technology and science areas. The suggestion is made, for example — and this is one example — that our years 11 and 12 students could go to La Trobe or go to Bundoora or go to Deakin and actually do part of their year 12 study — use a laboratory and the state-of-the-art equipment. Not just to access the equipment but to develop that relationship with the university, and to develop an understanding of what university life is like. There seems to be a lack of building the desire to go to university, and then there are inhibitors along the way.

Rural schools, such as Robinvale Secondary College, pride themselves on their knowledge and understanding of their students. I am suggesting there that the priority placement program that was in existence in some

universities — just straight recommendation from the principal of the school — that a student should have access and then some structure provided to support them. Coming from my year 12 English teacher, which is written in the recommendations is that, ‘Some of our students have the need or want to succeed. However, the reality or belief that it is in their hands is so far removed from their situation that they do not even reach’. That is why some students, particularly culturally diverse students, just do not go to university. It is just so far out of their reach that there is no point in even trying to grasp for it.

The last point I make is about vocational guidance. I suggest that needs to begin in schools well before the students hit year 12, which it does in our school. I maintain — and I am jumping to conclusions here — is that the data is pretty positive about us and our connecting the school to continuing education. They are the sort of things we would regard as important, and we would focus on, all things being equal with travel, access, cost, accommodation, fees, HECS.

**The CHAIR** — Thanks, Kevin. That was a very thorough presentation in terms of the issues you have covered. I do not know whether any of the other members of your team want to make any up-front comments, or just rely on us following up with some questions.

**Mr KOTSIRAS** — Kevin, can I just ask: what are the culturally diverse groups in your school? Which are the main ones?

**Mr LEE** — We have some white Anglo Saxons, we have a lot of Polynesians. About one-third of the schools is Polynesian or Koori. We have a large portion of indigenous students. I might also make the point that 13 indigenous students completed year 12 across the region last year, and 7 of them were from Robinvale. I believe we work exceptionally effectively with them.

I am embarrassed to say this but I will anyway: in terms of students at the school, we have got whatever the last war zone was. So we have got Afghans, students from the Middle East, the Philippines, Haitians, Fijians, some from South-East Asia, Cambodia — you name them, we have got them and they come to us with varying degrees of English.

Our emphasis for at least the last four years has been just building positive relationships and connecting the students to the school as a step-in for teaching them, and the results have been excellent.

**The CHAIR** — And following on that, the groups from those nationalities, have they come to you because of the labouring work that is available and associated with vineyards and the horticulture industry?

**Mr LEE** — Generally, yes.

**Ms VANDENBERG** — The local Aboriginal people are like a local people, mostly, but certainly the Polynesian people come for the work.

**The CHAIR** — But the other refugee groups that you talk about, presumably it is a similar story that they have come because of the low-skilled, initially, work that is available?

**Mr LEE** — Generally, yes.

**Mr KOTSIRAS** — And how does your school overcome the trauma from each group coming from overseas? Are there services here that will assist the school with those students?

**Mr LEE** — This is a sore point. It is a point of contention. I have actually made the comment that we are a school that works on its own. Again, we are in no-man’s-land. We are so far from Mildura and so far from Swan Hill that we might as well be in another state, and accessing the facilities is a severe issue for us.

We are a school of roughly 290 students but we have something like 17 teacher aides, and there are teacher aides whose job it is to keep track of the students, work with the students, sit with them, problem-help them, go home and get them out of bed and get them to school — all those sorts of things which are unheard of for a secondary school.

**Mr KOTSIRAS** — Does racism exist within the school amongst the kids?

**Mr LEE** — The parents tell me we spend less time in the school talking about race and more time talking about culture, and I think that is something we celebrate, and that is acknowledged. But we have two part-time school chaplains, we have a school nurse, we allow a lot of time for the welfare team. We have a team of people who work on welfare, and Di is part of that. She is our welfare coordinator.

We also feed the kids. We have a breakfast program; we have homework classes at night and we feed the students then. We have staff who volunteer to come back two nights a week, 6.00 p.m. to 8.00 p.m. to run homework classes; we have a very, very dedicated staff who are prepared to put in way beyond what they are expected to, and it makes a difference to our students. And you can see from this data on the front that we are actually getting the results at year 12, but when you go through some percentage data that is available from the department of education, you can see when we are compared to our like school groups in terms of socioeconomic background, we outperform them by a stretch, and that is why I am emphasising that one of the things that is missing from connecting kids to university is that relationship building, the clearly established pathways, but it is a pathway that the students have to be motivated to pick up.

I have made comment to staff that we have to teach our students. But if you put them in a classroom they can fail all on their own. We have to get off our backsides and do things for them, otherwise they will just drift along without any aspiration whatsoever and that is not acceptable.

**Mr DIXON** — Could I just ask the two students what you hope to do next year?

**Ms HOYLE-HOLDSWORTH** — I want to go to university to study nursing, even at La Trobe in Mildura, but I have to go kind of the way of my brother. My brother has gone to a university and I have to move to wherever he is going because my family cannot support both of us with accommodation.

**The CHAIR** — Where is he at the moment?

**Ms HOYLE-HOLDSWORTH** — He is in Mildura at the moment.

**The CHAIR** — Studying what?

**Ms HOYLE-HOLDSWORTH** — Studying accountancy, but he might be moving to Adelaide, so I might be moving to Adelaide.

**The CHAIR** — And Matthew?

**Mr CIMINO** — I am looking at maybe something towards business, maybe something at La Trobe uni too, in Mildura.

**Mr DIXON** — You still are aiming for university?

**Mr CIMINO** — Yes. It is one of the definite options I am looking at.

**Mr DIXON** — Have you got brothers and sisters at uni at all?

**Mr CIMINO** — No.

**The CHAIR** — I am interested to get Di's perspective as a parent.

**Ms VANDENBERG** — I have a daughter in her third year at uni at La Trobe in Bendigo. My other daughter chose to go to La Trobe in Mildura. The costs are the same except for a bit of petrol I guess. I thought it would be cheaper in Mildura but it is not. It is virtually the same cost for the two of them. It is so close, but I would not want her driving every day to Mildura on the road. It is a really busy road. They are both doing teaching.

**The CHAIR** — She is in what sort of accommodation?

**Ms VANDENBERG** — She was on campus. At La Trobe they have a — —

**The CHAIR** — Yes, we have seen that this morning.

**Ms VANDENBERG** — Which needs a bit of an upgrade.

**The CHAIR** — Some of it has been.

**Ms VANDENBERG** — That is where she has been living. She is about to shift out. It is a difficult situation. A lot of students would not even consider it because it is a big financial drain on parents. I think they see it as not an option because you really do have to put your life aside and pay for those things, if you want your children to do that. I know that for the Tongan students it is just not in their world. A lot of them are going to year 12 and doing quite well, but they just cannot make that next step, because without that family support and understanding the costs are too high.

**Mr DIXON** — Are they a group who aspire towards TAFE and trades?

**Ms VANDENBERG** — Well, they do aspire towards university. Peter, as the career coordinator, would tell you that. A lot of our students did go off and visit all the unis and see what they could get into. When it comes to the crunch, financially it is not possible.

**The CHAIR** — So in this case it is more the parents feeling they could not afford to send them and so on?

**Ms VANDENBERG** — Yes. The kids do not ask.

**The CHAIR** — And the students themselves would have been keen to go; is that what you are saying?

**Ms VANDENBERG** — Yes, the kids are keen, but they would think, ‘Well, we can’t ask our parents’. The Tongan students are very mindful of not putting that pressure on their parents and there is not an option. There is an excellent scholarship in Mildura that they are offering now for students from the region, if you choose to go to La Trobe uni. It was an RSL scholarship. Some sort of scholarships like that would be fantastic, for the government to offer rural students to study in rural areas, I guess, to encourage them — just even to help with their accommodation. This was just a small one, but I thought it was a really positive step on Mildura’s part, to acknowledge the challenge it is.

**The CHAIR** — You have not made use of the Chances for Children program that we heard about just before?

**Ms VANDENBERG** — We have. Our school has done that, through helping a student who went to university last year, with a single mum and a really struggling family. We helped get a laptop so he could support his studies, because he had to do a lot. I mean, everything is online now. Without a computer, you are pretty well handicapped. He chose to live with relatives, which was cheaper, but then did not have computer access, so it was good that we got a computer for him.

**Mr HERBERT** — Thanks, Di. I am just trying to reconcile what happens in Melbourne, in my personal experience, and what we have been hearing about regional areas. I know that with my own children and all their friends, they all worked part time — you know, Saturdays and Sundays — while they were at school. Then at university it is not uncommon for most of their friends, those who go to university, to work — at hotels, or wherever — on Saturday, Sunday and perhaps one or two nights a week. For those who get the youth allowance that makes a difference between having living costs and not. I have not got a feeling that that is part of the expectations or culture here.

**Ms VANDENBERG** — It is.

**Mr HERBERT** — I am just trying to work out whether that is in fact the case, that I have misread it, or there are less job opportunities, that sort of thing.

**Ms VANDENBERG** — There probably are less job opportunities, and it is hard. Say for my daughter in Bendigo, I am reluctant to sort of force her into a job down there because that means that she does not get to come home for holidays, and that is a big issue — because you lock yourself into a job and you cannot come home, and a lot of country kids like to come home. Both my daughters work in all the school holidays in the holiday program for the children — they run the holiday program here — and on the potatoes or at Fishers. They both work, but it still does not cover accommodation costs. I mean, you are looking at at least — I think at minimum it would be \$6000 each to live in on campus, with no food. Then they have to have that support, too. They can raise or earn some money to live off, but you still have to support their travel and accommodation costs.

**Mr LEE** — Can I also just comment on that? I am aware that a lot of students who leave here and do go to university or TAFE actually do have part-time work or they have pre-apprenticeship or apprenticeship-type payments.

I also believe that getting a job is also something of a disincentive, because there has been, up to the drought — and now even now with the drought on — the availability of part-time work or full-time work, and huge earns are there. The kids have got to ask themselves why they would go to university and continue with study for something some time in the future and end up with debt and responsibility when they can get a job here driving a tractor for \$500 a week plus overtime. It is just something kids do not connect to — that long-term vision.

**The CHAIR** — Can I follow up a bit, too, a bit on the parental aspiration? You were talking about the Tongan group in particular. I guess it follows across other groups in your school too. The students might be interested or there is bit of a chance of getting some of them to go on to tertiary. What might be able to be done to get across that hurdle?

**Mr LEE** — In the financial sense?

**The CHAIR** — Whatever; what do you think it might need to get a couple of Tongan students, for example, to go on to university?

**Mr LEE** — I think it comes back to the sort of work Peter does. We introduced work-related skills as a core subject. Every year 10 student does work-related skills. It is roughly 100 minutes a week. We take them to Melbourne. They plan, they look at careers, they look at jobs. In doing that, they are building that familiarity and that aspiration. By the time they have done that, we can anticipate the curriculum several years in advance based on the information we have got from those students. Then we take them to work experience for 10 days in Melbourne and introduce them to some of the life in Melbourne. They stay down there, and we take them to open days. I am suggesting it is purely information and, like, a comfort zone.

**The CHAIR** — Yes, that part sounds great to me, and it sounds like you have won over a number of students. But getting that message back to parents — is there an opportunity to do something in working with parents in some way to raise that aspiration? Or is it a matter of the student themselves having to see it is so important?

**Mr LEE** — I think you are right; I think it is both. We do less with the parents.

**The CHAIR** — It is a bit more of a challenge.

**Mr LEE** — Yes, it comes down more to the aspiration of the student. As has already been hinted, some of the students see it so far out of their reach that they do not try. However, through the work-related skills program that Peter runs, you see it more within their reach, and that has an impact on them.

**Mr CARNEGIE** — There is a generational thing with the Polynesian students, too, because of that. As Kevin said, you can make \$500 a week working down at one of the large almond farms here — \$500 cash, after tax. For an 18-year-old student, that is fairly good money compared to when they have been going through school. If you are in a family of 8 or 10 and you have got 5 of those children under the age of 5 who need to be taken to school and paid for in fees and books et cetera, to take a student, as Di said, not only remove them from that \$500 a week, which contributes to the family and to church, there is a lot of pressure from families from the parents.

**Mr HERBERT** — Peter, just on Di's point, I wonder whether one part of it is lifting aspirations, but on your point that they see the financial — having to move away and finance — as too insurmountable. But the thing of it is, students are rarely given an opportunity to say, 'Here we go, this is what you costs are. If you work part time' — and I just did some figures then — '12 hours a week and holidays, you will earn about \$11 000 or \$12 000, if you get the youth allowance', and going through that sort of thing so you can draw a picture where it is at least feasible. I wonder whether there is any sort of programs like that.

**Ms VANDENBERG** — The problem is many of them do not get the youth allowance because both parents are working on the almond farms, so they rarely get that for a starter. To me, if they had some sort of accommodation scholarship which sort of got them there — and they will work in the holidays. Most uni kids here

come home. They do work all the holidays. They get the jobs and they earn their living expenses that way, and then hopefully get enough money to go on to their own independent youth allowance.

**Mr HERBERT** — It all comes down to the independent youth allowance and the 18 months, 12 months.

**Ms VANDENBERG** — It does.

**The CHAIR** — The last one I wanted to get a sense of, there has not been an issue with students having aspiration of getting into tertiary but not getting the TER scores, the ENTER scores that are going to get them in?

**Mr LEE** — There has been the occasional one. Yes, there has been.

**The CHAIR** — But it is more the aspiration and the affordability issue.

**Mr LEE** — Yes.

**Ms VANDENBERG** — They get an incredible lot of support at school. Because we are a small school, we go above and beyond. I know Peter is still working with students who left school last year, helping them get into the police force, getting them into university. He is still doing that now. They get all that support. But when they leave school, the supports have gone normally for most kids. That is the hard step. That is the stepping stone. We lose them. They are really keen, keen, keen right up to the school holidays. If we lose contact, that is the end of their hopes really, because we are their support structure. We need something else in place that picks them up from when they leave us.

**Mr KOTSIRAS** — It is not relevant to this debate, but the uniform — is that compulsory at the school, Kevin?

**Mr LEE** — This uniform?

**Mr KOTSIRAS** — Yes.

**Mr LEE** — No, this is a jacket that we give the school captains. We sent two student leaders to the Anzac Day service at Villiers Bretonneux in France this year. We have adopted this for the senior students.

**Mr KOTSIRAS** — It is quite nice.

**Mr LEE** — Just before you show us the door — —

**The CHAIR** — Politely.

**Mr LEE** — Can I just make one other comment? There is an inference, I guess, because we have been talking mainly about money that it comes down to the dollars, the bottom line. I think to some degree that is partly right. But in some of our kids, knowing the character of some of our parents and some of the students, if the incentive was there or the connection was made, they would fight tooth and nail to achieve what they wanted to achieve. That is why we have suggested in this document I have given you about establishing the sister city relationship. It is not just about orientation, it is about transition. The transition has got to start well before the student hits year 12. The psychology of, 'I have got to work hard at this. I have got to get an ENTER score and I need this to get in', is really where some of our kids are at. You can tell. You could probably guess the ones who are midway through year 11 who have got that drive to keep going. You can look at the ones who should have the drive and you can help them, but there needs to be something coming back from the unis. We just need more support. We need someone on the ground, whether it is some connection, whether it is using their laboratories or their facilities or something, whatever that is. I have just suggested through the school council that it is that sister city relationship.

**Mr HERBERT** — Kevin, La Trobe is kind of in this area. La Trobe was probably the hardest hit following the 1996 federal budget cuts, and they have struggled since then really. Have other universities explored operating up here as well?

**Mr ILSLEY** — No. It is hard finding universities with the appropriate courses too. A lot of our year 12 graduates go on to science and engineering courses, and there is just nothing like that up here. La Trobe and



Mildura do not have a general science course, for instance, where they could at least do a first year up here. They have to go to Melbourne to do science and engineering. It is the appropriateness of courses at regional universities — that is a big problem.

**The CHAIR** — We are of course going to hear from La Trobe University next. Thank you very much for your contribution, Robinvale. I think the comments you have made are very rounded, and take that latter point that you wanted to emphasise too.

**Mr LEE** — Thanks very much for that.

**Witnesses withdrew.**



# CORRECTED VERSION

## EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

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

Robinvale — 2 June 2008

#### Members

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

Chair: Mr G. Howard

Deputy Chair: Mr N. Kotsiras

#### Staff

Executive Officer: Ms K. Ellingford

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Administrative Officer: Ms N. Tyler

#### Witness

Mr K. Farrell, executive director, La Trobe University, Mildura campus.

**The CHAIR** — Welcome, Kent. We of course met you this morning when we looked over the La Trobe University facilities. It is good now to have your formal discussion that we will be able to document. Over to you for the comments that you want to make. You have obviously heard the earlier submissions, which all sort of lead on to a number of things you could add to us.

**Mr FARRELL** — Indeed. Thanks, Geoff, and thanks to the committee for the opportunity to address you this afternoon. You are aware of course that La Trobe did make a formal submission, which you would be in receipt of.

There was also a submission from the equity access unit, which supported it, with a lot of statistics in terms of the financials relating to students and parents. A lot of those issues have been repeated here today, but I will make a note that those things are done. Most of the information for that came from the student finances document, which I have here, and I may refer to a little later.

If I could start by saying that I would like to follow up on the reports that have been submitted in three key areas. Firstly, I would like to look at the economic aspects, of which you have heard a fair bit today already. I would then like to talk about the social and emotional elements that we have scooted around but people have not perhaps given as much attention to as they could have, and then I would like to talk, finally, about how this sits nationally, in comparison to other countries, and I would like to bring in the concept of equity.

If I could start firstly on the economic elements. A lot of the evidence you have already heard from the LLEN, from Gannawarra shire, the Murray Valley LLEN; Chances for Children, and of course the eloquent delivery from the schools. What you will hear there no doubt is a range of common themes and common barriers that most of these groups are presenting as being reasons children are not participating in higher education, and I can agree with most of them; in fact I would agree with all of them, as far as they have been presented. In terms of economics there are two elements to this. One is the individual cost of attending, or having a child attend university, and some of you in this room will be familiar with that I know; I certainly am, or was. There are also the economic elements of La Trobe being a reasonable provider.

One of the challenges for La Trobe of course is that we are Victoria's only true regional university. If you refer to the document that was submitted by the university, the submission from Paul Johnson, you would be aware that the cost of running La Trobe University's regional operations, whilst it varies from campus to campus, can be anything from a 25 per cent surplus to a 100 per cent surplus. In other words, it costs us that much more to run a regional operation. There are reasons for this, and some of them have been touched on here today already. The blended delivery model is a good example of why we have not used the technology as much as perhaps one might consider we should use it. It is widely used, I should make that point, but what we are hearing is people do not want that. It is no good providing a product that people do not necessarily want. What we need to do is try and find a balance between the use of technology and the use of traditional university face-to-face tutorials, lectures and so forth. That provides challenges, not only in terms of finding appropriately qualified staff, but also the cost of running such an operation.

One of the things that I think we need to be aware of is that La Trobe cannot offer at its regional campuses the range of courses that it would like to. This morning we discussed the fact that science is no longer on offer at Mildura, and then you heard that comment a moment ago that that would be an option that perhaps would be a useful thing, and I agree, however, it comes down simply to supply and demand. If the demand is there, then the university can, with the appropriate support from the federal government, provide places for students to undertake those particular training courses.

In terms of what courses are currently offered at Mildura, I will just bring that to the committee's attention. We offer a bachelor of visual arts; a bachelor of nursing; a bachelor of nursing (division 2) and articulated pathway; a bachelor of arts, with history, sociology and politics as options; a bachelor of commerce; a bachelor of business; a bachelor of education; a bachelor of graphic design; a bachelor of social work; a bachelor of social work (honours), for the first time this year; a graduate diploma in education; a graduate diploma in accounting; a bachelor of visual arts (honours); a bachelor of visual arts, graphic design (honours); and of course our doctoral programs through our Riverlink partners. That is a significant set of offerings for a campus that has a 23 000-person population.

I think one of the things we have to do is make sure that the courses that we do offer at Mildura in particular are able to meet the regional skills shortages that face this region, and that can be applied to any campus of any

university in a regional setting. We have an obligation to try and make sure that we produce enough doctors and nurses and teachers and businesspeople to be able to meet the needs of our communities. In terms of strong communities, if one is to take the words of Tony Vinson, in the social indicators document and other publications that he and others have presented, the cohesion between these things is dependent on a number of key factors — education being one, good health services being another, adequate and suitable transport facilities being the third, and you can go on and on, but they are the three main ones.

Professionals will not come to regional areas if they do not have security in the knowledge that their children can get a good education, that they are going to have good health care, and that they are going to be able to get in and out of the place, or around the place, as required. And obviously small business plays an incredibly important part in that role. They are the fundamental factors, if you like, of what a good, functioning society really needs.

One of the challenges that we have at La Trobe at the moment is being able to make sure that the concept of what we deliver is not only suitable to help meet the regional skills shortages but will actually give people opportunities to move on to other things. I recognise that some students — in fact my eldest son was an example. At that stage we were living in Gippsland. He wanted to do an engineering course; it was not available in Gippsland. Despite the fact that I was the deputy head of the faculty of business and economics I still could not convince him to take on economics, so he chose to go to Melbourne. I am critically aware of the costs of running the business — yes, that is what it is — of keeping your children at school; it is an expensive business. There will always be a percentage of students who choose not to go to a local university, either because it does not have the course on offer that they require, or they may have friends or families in other locations, or there may be a range of other reasons that they choose to leave the area. We actually encourage that to happen. We believe that students should pursue those areas of interest that they believe will be best for them.

Having said that, one of the challenges we have is to make sure that what we do offer is going to meet the needs of the community and the needs of as many students as possible. Having said that — and I made this point in private this morning — at the end of 2007 every graduate from the education degree was offered employment, every graduate. The situation with the business students, for example, is that most of them join as full-time students. By the time they reach their second or third year they are all part-time students; the reason being they have all secured employment in the area, and hopefully they will stay in the area when they are finished. I think in terms of meeting some of the regional skill shortages we are doing a pretty reasonable job.

You have heard Glenn from the Murray Mallee LLEN discuss the relationship we have developed, or that is developing, with Swan Hill. I have only been at La Trobe for 10 months. I have recently arrived from the Middle East, where I spent seven years in a commercial education operation. In fact some of the challenges we have here are not all that different to some of the challenges that we have in the Middle East. Let me make a point about the Middle East though, and I will pick this up in the latter part of my address. In the United Arab Emirates, for example, where I spent most of my time, in 2005-06 there were approximately 14 000 eligible students who could go on to higher education. Ten thousand two hundred took up that opportunity — figures that we could only be very envious of, I am sure.

One of the other things, I think, that has come out of the discussions you heard previously is the impact of the student allowances — how that impacts, why students actually take a year off — so they can get themselves in a position — that seems to me to be very counterproductive in its own right.

The other element of course is that we have a large mature-age market. Some 65 per cent of the students at Mildura are mature age — for one reason or another they have decided not to take on any form of tertiary study early but have come back later on. That has a significant impact on the way we deliver our courses. We have a large regional catchment area, and you have heard some of those things from Robinvale today, and the other schools as well.

We have a large indigenous population, and some of you would be aware — I mentioned this this morning during your visit — that we have just recently appointed an indigenous student support officer. At the moment we have seven indigenous students on the campus and we have five more in the pipeline through the TAFE system. There are articulation processes through the TAFE — we work very closely with the Sunraysia Institute of TAFE as a collaborative partner. We see them as being a feeder for us, and they see their ability being to provide us with the students who want to take that extra step.

In many cases I would argue and say — and this is from other work I have done at another institution — one of the reasons that some of the regional students do not take up higher education is a lack of confidence. They perhaps do not feel they have got the capability to do it.

Part of that could be because — and I think it has probably already been mentioned here, but I would like to punctuate it — there is no adequate role modelling in the family. If no other brothers, sisters, parents or close relatives have actually undertaken tertiary study, then there is no role modelling to encourage an individual to do just that. I can use my personal case as an example. When I left school, I said to my parents, ‘What do you think I should do?’, and they said, ‘Well, you should get a trade. Everyone gets a trade. That’s good money’. In those days it was not such good money, but I note the point that today it is. So I went off and did that. After I got my trade — that is why I was sort of smiling today when we were walking through the TAFE workshop; I did my trade at Balcombe as a motor mechanic — I did not like it. I did not like the chosen vocation, so I decided to move on. I then went to university, I did other things, and moved on from there.

No-one in my family had ever suggested that I should go university. If you ask my colleagues, they will repeat this story time and time again for you. Interestingly enough, in my family — not all of my children have gone on to tertiary study; two of them have and one has not — there was never any other expectation than that all my children would go on to tertiary study. My wife and I are both tertiary educated. I do not know what it was; it was just a family expectation. We did not push them to do it but they chose to do it — and I suspect because they saw the economic benefits that came with tertiary study. There is that element to consider as well.

You have heard about the changing economic environment, and how in the past jobs were perhaps easy for young men or women to get after year 11 or 12. They are a little more difficult to get now. Where before they could leave school and get a job and a reasonable income, those options are being closed off quite quickly. One of the challenges we have in fact is that if those people do not finish high school — and I have some very disturbing OECD data here — and then choose to go to either the local regional employment market or, heaven forbid, a metro city market, where the completion rates are much higher, they are already behind the eight ball as far as employment is concerned. They will find it much more difficult simply to get a job. We have raised the bar, and that is a good thing, but in some cases it is going to make it very difficult for young people to get employment..

The OECD data is really quite disturbing. I did some quick comparisons. These figures relate to the percentage of population over whatever the age is who have some secondary education, complete or incomplete, and the population percentage over that age with completed secondary education. In 2000 in Australia, according to the OECD data, the relationship was 0.724 to 0.287. Let me draw your attention to what it was in the UK and the US. That same relationship — and these figures relate specifically to people 25 and over — for the same period in the UK was 0.74 to 0.53 and in the US it was 0.60 to 0.51. We compare, I believe, with the likes of Trinidad, Tobago, Tanzania, Uganda — and the list goes on. We have a lot of work to do, if that data is correct — and I have no reason to suspect that it is wrong.

If I can move on to some of the emotional things that I think are very important. Prior to going overseas, I worked closely with Queensland education at Central Queensland University to set up a transition program because over a glass of red wine one night I, a lecturer of first-year students, said to my wife, who was a school principal, ‘Those kids never come to us well prepared’. She said, ‘What do you do to prepare them?’. From that grew the transition program. It was for students in year 12 coming into the university environment and becoming familiar with where they would probably end up and was a very successful program. We heard of some of the benefits that our professional educators believe that would have for us.

There are economic transitions in terms of the expense. I was interested to hear that it costs just as much to go Mildura as it does to go to Melbourne. I found that quite interesting. It does not make a good situation; it makes a bad situation worse, actually.

There is the physical transition — that is, the changing environment from teaching and learning styles. The styles of education in high school versus the teaching and learning styles in higher education are dramatically different. In most tertiary institutions students are seen as self-directed learners. That may not be quite the case in every high school that they come from. Some interesting changes occur for students when they undergo that transition.

One of the emotional and social factors I would like to point out — and this you have heard from other people today — is the loss of friends and family. If students do move off to a new area, away from the region where they

have been brought up and perhaps had most of their primary and secondary schooling, they have to find new friends. If they do not have family, they have real challenges in terms of accommodation and how they will look after themselves. They do not have that network of people to provide support from them when they are away from home. I believe that that is a critical part of what we need to be looking at: how we might be able to provide support.

On the economic impacts, you have heard them and you have seen them; I will not go over them. They are significant. The dropout rate of first-year students is 30 per cent, or at least it was when I left the country a few years ago, and we have heard that here it is closer to 50 per cent. One could ask the question: why? Interestingly, if you want to stay at university when you go away, one of the things you have to do is get a part-time job. That in itself, added to having to do your study — with new study styles, new location, new friends and perhaps no family — means it is no wonder that these kids have a hard time of it. This is a real challenge.

The other point that I had not realised — and I am grateful to one of my colleagues for raising it — is that once you do get a part-time job then you cannot leave the part-time job to come back and at least get some of the links back into your friends and family where you came from. So in fact these things become more complex by their very nature. The other element of course is the transport costs of getting to and from. They are quite expensive. Most students cannot afford to run their own car. Those who are fortunate enough to have parents who can help them with vehicles are indeed very fortunate. There are a few issues there that you might like to think about.

You heard Chances for Children discuss what I believe to be a very important program. Yes, I would like to see the state government look more closely at those funding options. If you are going to look at where real work is being done in helping to address some of these situations, that is a program that you start with, no question. We believe it to be so. Because of the very limited budget that La Trobe has, I provide a significant sum of money to that program, not just for La Trobe students. They might not go to La Trobe; they might go to Melbourne or Adelaide. It does not matter; it is to give them the opportunity. A fair slice of my marketing budget goes towards Chances for Children, because I believe it is helping our community grow stronger.

There are other technology issues that we mentioned. There are different learning styles as well. Not everyone learns well in front of a computer. However, the good news is that younger people are more attuned to that type of learning. I believe that, as time goes by — provided the resource base is there to deliver it properly in the first place — this will be a very useful way of delivering university education, but not the only way.

On transition, I mentioned earlier the program with Queensland education. In fact, from what I have heard here today, I believe that that is a program that perhaps we need to look at more closely for this regional area as well. I will give you an undertaking now that that will be done.

Outreach programs back into schools are clearly important. In the nine months that I have been here we perhaps have not done as much as we could have, and we certainly did not do enough prior to that. I will make the point now that it is resource based and we run a tight ship as it is. Having people go out to schools to do what has to be considered very important work simply means that they do not do other work. One of the challenges I have is to find out who is going to do this other work. The truth of the matter is that I am becoming quite familiar with most of the school principals. I find that is very useful.

On entry into programs, we have heard — and I believe it to be true — that firstly we need to access years 8, 9 and 10 parents, particularly those who have no tertiary education background, and of course the students in that bracket as well. I believe we need to deal with them as a separate group in their own right. Year 11 and 12 students are obvious because choices are being made, but years 8, 9 and 10 are the preformative points from where these choices will probably roll out a little later on. It is important to provide the benefits of higher education to people who have perhaps never had to worry about it. I think that is an effort which you will see we have already started to ramp up quite considerably. We need to give more information to the gatekeepers and obviously the school counsellors. They play a critical role in all these things. In fact we have appointed a staff member to try to do just that part time — that is all we can afford. If I am running out of time, just tell me to stop.

**The CHAIR** — You are getting close to that point.

**Mr FARRELL** — Thank you for being so candid, Geoff. The sister-city relationship I believe is quite a useful thing. We intend to increase our relationship with the high schools as quickly as possible, but frankly we are not doing enough there. It is as simple as that.

Just to finish off I want to talk about Australia as an education exporter. We are very good at this. I know this because I have been working overseas and I see the quality and the level of esteem that Australian education is held in in the international marketplace. We are very good at getting international students to come to this country, and we are very good at exporting our education out of this country. That might make us the Lucky Country, but it does not make us the smart country. What we are experiencing locally is a move away from tertiary education for all the wrong reasons. If students were choosing not to take on tertiary studies, that would be a choice, provided it was made with full knowledge that they could make it on. But they are not making the decision based on that. I am afraid they are making their decision based on external control factors such as economics — in this region the drought and the impact of the changing economic climate — and I would argue a lack of good role modelling in the first place.

What can we do about it? I suggested to one of your federal colleagues the other day that perhaps differential HECS fees might be one option, and he said, ‘What do you mean by differential HECS fees?’. I said, ‘If you live, work and study in the regions, you do not pay as much HECS’. I said, ‘The bottom line would be that you would not have as big a bill to start with and you would not have as big a tax bill at the end’. Interestingly, the comment was, ‘Oh, but that will mean that all the students from Melbourne will come up here’. I cannot quite see what the problem with that is, but that was the response. I think that needs to be seriously looked at. I know that that is well beyond the scope of this committee, but I would certainly like you to take it away and give it some consideration.

I am also quite concerned — I mentioned our doctoral work; we had two doctoral graduates recently, in February this year — with the pending or proposed, or whatever you like to call it, closure of CSIRO that will effectively mean that our primary vehicle for providing world-class researchers back into the industry will be taken away from us. I just want to spend a moment on this because this is critically important nationally. These people — both of them — have just done projects that came from the farm gate. The farm gate recognised problems with citrus in one case, and I will focus on that one. The PhD student worked with the researchers at CSIRO. At the end of the day, they found solutions to farm gate problems. That is critically important work. I was in France a few years ago and was introduced to a guy and was told, ‘This guy has come from Australia. He is showing us how to grow vines’. For goodness sake — in the middle of a vineyard in France! We are exporting our knowledge out, but I am afraid that we are giving ourselves a bigger gap to keep up with it.

Finally, I just want to reiterate the fact that this is a fairly interesting situation. In a country with 5 million people, 14 000 students had the opportunity to go on to higher education and 10 000 took it up. We have a lot of work to do if we do not intend to remain a third world country as far as tertiary education is concerned. And that would be my submission. Thank you.

**The CHAIR** — Thanks, Kent.

**Mr FARRELL** — Are there any questions? Stunned silence.

**Mr HERBERT** — I take your point very much about the need to rebuild higher education. I am sure Julia Gillard has that point very much on her agenda.

**Mr FARRELL** — Thank you, Steve. I hope she reads the proceedings.

**Mr HERBERT** — Yes. And can I just ask you a couple of questions? Firstly, the proposal for the Central Murray university centre.

**Mr FARRELL** — Through the Murray Mallee LLEN?

**Mr HERBERT** — Yes. That is right.

**Mr FARRELL** — At Swan Hill?

**Mr HERBERT** — We heard that whilst it has slowed down there have been very fruitful discussions with Latrobe University. What I would like to know is what are the procedures in place — it is a different type of delivery — for normal academic standards, for academic review and peer review et cetera? What is proposed to be put in place to ensure that academic standards are met that are comparable with Melbourne, Bendigo, wherever?

**Mr FARRELL** — That is a good question, Steve. The courses that we offer our regional campuses are in fact no different to the courses that we offer in Bundoora. They are the same content. They are often taught by the



same professors. They are assessed at the same level. The ENTER may be different, but as an economist I will tell you that is simply supply and demand. That is the only reason why the ENTERs vary. Basically they are the same course. Of course the challenge is to get good qualified staff to deliver them.

You heard the comment about beaming in lecturers. I mean that is basically what it is. The reason for that is to try to maintain the quality, because you are going to find that those professors are able to deliver information into those classrooms that is most useful. It is not the ideal situation. We all know that the talking head does not work all that well, but neither does the chalk and talk either. We need to find innovative ways of blending our delivery methods. It means that the university has to train its staff adequately to be able to do this.

**Mr HERBERT** — I understand that, and it sounds like a great idea. What I am wanting to know is if you are talking about a model for regional delivery, what sort of formal model for academic standards in that sort of more flexible delivery is being proposed?

**Mr FARRELL** — There are no variations in standards. The delivery method might vary. It might be fly-in fly-out, as you are alluding to, I believe. It might be a combination of CD-ROM and DVD delivery. It might be a combination of talk and chalk — that is, a talking lecturer out the front. A lot of that support would occur in tutorials of course, but there is a variety of methods that can be used.

**Mr HERBERT** — I must have got it wrong. I thought they were advocating that there would be more working out in the community, bringing in experts in the community and non-professional staff.

**Mr FARRELL** — They would contribute.

**Mr HERBERT** — I would have just thought by nature that that type of delivery, with different delivery, would require a slightly different approach in terms of the academic standards regime.

**Mr FARRELL** — There will be no compromise in the standards, obviously.

**Mr HERBERT** — I am not saying there will be. I am just wondering how you would do that.

**Mr FARRELL** — No, I appreciate that. Some professional bodies have certain strict requirements — for example, social work. Only certain qualified people are allowed to deliver the material. Is that the point that you were making, that type of question?

**Mr HERBERT** — I am just wondering whether that has been discussed.

**Mr FARRELL** — It has been discussed. I made the point to Glenn the other day, and to Peter Walsh and Peter Crisp who were in my office, that our business people have been working closely with the Murray Mallee LLEN and, more importantly, the businesses in Swan Hill. If we had the EFTUs, we could run a program there tomorrow. It is as simple as that. There is nothing more complicated than that. If the federal government gave us the EFTUs tomorrow, we could start the course.

**Mr HERBERT** — Okay. So what you are really saying is that there would not be a need for any academic oversight because it would simply be a Latrobe-registered provider.

**Mr FARRELL** — It would be Latrobe University, and all of the standards and quality that would be in place would be equally applied in that location as anywhere else. That is one of the barriers.

**Mr HERBERT** — There have been significant issues with universities coming in and setting up shopfronts in Melbourne and in other places in terms of the quality provision; that is why I just asked that question.

**Mr FARRELL** — It is a fair question, though. But it would be totally out of the control of Latrobe University.

**Mr HERBERT** — Can I just ask a second question? You have mentioned how in regional campuses you cut out some subjects and that you try to provide disciplines that meet the economic needs.

**Mr FARRELL** — Yes, regional skills shortages.

**Mr HERBERT** — Do you think that should be the driving force of regional campuses — that they should be focused?

**Mr FARRELL** — No. No, I do not.

**Mr HERBERT** — And secondly, should it be part of the course load discussions with federal, state and perhaps local governments?

**Mr FARRELL** — The answer to your first question is yes and no. Yes, we have an obligation to meet regional skill shortages to make sure that the communities in which we operate are viable and strong, and one of the ways is making sure there are enough teachers, nurses and so forth. So, yes, that is part of it. But one could argue: what good is an arts program in that mix? Many people do not work in the area of their first degree. If we went around the table now, we would probably find that is the case in this very room.

I think as an employer — unless I had been a doctor or a lawyer — I never looked at what that person's first degree was. What I was looking for was the fact that they had undertaken tertiary study and had gone through the rigour of a university education. It was that self-discipline that went along with that and the drive — and you heard this earlier from students — to get the job done which was the indicating factor of how successful someone might be. In many cases they were employed when their first degrees had no relationship to the job that they were doing anyway. There are, of course, professional requirements. I think brain surgeons should actually have a medical degree.

**Mr HERBERT** — The question is whether there should be a generalist approach or whether you should focus on — —

**Mr FARRELL** — Indeed. In terms of regional skills shortages that does not fit that model, but in fact I believe it is an important part of providing a tertiary education in a regional location. It is a bit like saying — Oxford is a good example — 'We will take philosophy out because it does not really provide any jobs for anyone'. What would Oxford be without the philosophy degree? You would not have it, of course.

**Mr HERBERT** — Just very quickly, you say at the front of this submission that you have 6000 students — regional students.

**Mr FARRELL** — Six thousand regional students; 25 per cent of the university's load.

**Mr HERBERT** — When I look through there are other figures here that say 4381 and about 5000. Is that 6000 full time or 6000 total?

**Mr FARRELL** — That is probably 6000 total. Those other figures are probably breakdowns of full-time, part-time or whatever.

**Mr HERBERT** — Okay.

**The CHAIR** — Have you finished with the cross-examination?

**Mr HERBERT** — Yes, completely finished.

**Mr FARRELL** — I welcome the questions; I really do. We are passionate about providing quality education to the regions. As much as we would like to provide as many courses and options for students as we can, we simply cannot do that, so we do have to focus on those we can do, and do them very well.

**Mr HERBERT** — That is right, and that is what we all want.

**Mr FARRELL** — Indeed.

**Witness withdrew.**

# CORRECTED VERSION

## EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

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

Robinvale — 2 June 2008

#### Members

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

Chair: Mr G. Howard

Deputy Chair: Mr N. Kotsiras

#### Staff

Executive Officer: Ms K. Ellingford

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

Administrative Officer: Ms N. Tyler

#### Witnesses

Mr L. Moser, indigenous community engagement broker, Aboriginal Affairs Victoria, Department of Planning and Community Development;

Ms S. Connelly, career educator, Swan Hill North Primary School; and

Mr B. Kennedy.

**The CHAIR** — Lawrence, I understand there is a funeral on today that is stopping some of the other representatives from coming along to speak to us, but we are certainly pleased that you are able to come along to speak to us about Aboriginal issues as they relate to opportunities in tertiary education. We welcome you here, and Sue might have a chance to add some of her comments, too.

**Mr MOSER** — Thank you.

**The CHAIR** — If you would like to offer your perspective to us or the things that you have found about the challenges from a Koori perspective in terms of getting into tertiary education and through the education system that would be good. We would then like to be able to have some time to ask you some questions, if you like.

**Mr MOSER** — Very good. I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the country: in respect to Robinvale, Latje Latje, aunts and uncles past and present, and my brothers and sisters here today. In terms of the mob sitting at the table, Sue has come along representing the Swan Hill local indigenous network (LIN), and my brother boy on the end is Brendan Kennedy, traditional owner group for the Robinvale mob. That is the first bit.

Yes, there is sorry business going on for our mob. Alan Walsh, one of the other speakers who was going to come along — or ‘Boondy’, as he prefers to be known — has gone to Balranald to represent family groups in respect of that, so there you go.

I suppose what I sort of wanted to bring to the table — Sue will talk about her own perspective in terms of the LIN and as an indigenous person in her own right and a parent; and certainly my brother down here, Brendan, as well — I had a PowerPoint presentation that I was keen to do, but in hindsight it is probably just a plagiarised version of what you have seen from Murray Mallee LLEN’s presentation from Glenn Stewart.

I probably wanted to pick up on a number of the points from Glenn’s submission to the inquiry, and they are around a range of things in that certainly from Murray Mallee LLEN and their paper that was presented, you would have seen things around the picture for the economy of the area, participation rates of students through the various year levels within the schooling sector, all of that sort of stuff. And from a non-indigenous perspective whilst that paints a picture — and having read the paper, that is pretty well spot on, I think, for the area — it worries me that the element that is probably not that well represented in the paper is that the indigenous representation is not there in a number of areas.

We are continuing to struggle in regard to things around retention. We are struggling with getting kids from certainly year 7 through to year 10 and then on. We are not being afforded opportunities in the vocational educational streams, and if you look at the higher education stuff in terms of whether it is our mob as an indigenous mob being able to pick up on what is offered through the providers that are about, the opportunities are pretty limited for our mob.

In terms of your inquiry and looking at things around transport, looking at community and cultural issues, there is probably a whole range of things that are impacting on us — as in the mob — that probably you guys need to be aware of. And they are things that are happening at a commonwealth level that maybe you people as individuals might be able to have discussions at another level about, that might assist.

For example, there is an inquiry at the moment going on from the commonwealth point of view to do with indigenous employment programs and the demise of the commonwealth development employment program. CDEP was one of those programs that was enabling some of our mob at a local level to participate in higher education. We do not have CDEP in the southern states any more, it has been done away with, and therefore places like Mildura, Robinvale and Swan Hill are further impacted by the passing or the demise of that particular program with it being used as a vehicle to further education. Whether or not you people as state representatives are able to have input into that commonwealth inquiry at the moment, it would be wonderful from my point of view as an indigenous person just in terms of that level of the education input.

Without me hogging the floor, certainly Sue has probably got some things that she would like to express and I am sure brother boy down the end here does.

**Ms CONNELLY** — Although I am one of the LINs members I would rather speak as a career educator from the Swan Hill North Primary School where I have been for five years. It used to be called ASPA and now we have a different type of funding.

When ASPA finished we started our own parent committee and we have been quite successful in getting some funding for different programs. I would like to give you a copy of our actual Swan Hill North Primary School, Parents School Partnership Initiative (PSPI) committee mission statement and our plan. It has got some really good stuff in that and also just — you know it is National Reconciliation Week still — their little magazine has some good issues in it and I would love you to look at that because it sort of goes in with some of the things I am asking for today. One of the heartbreaking things about being a career educator is that in the past three years I have had three students come from other schools who were in grade 5 or 6 and their level was grade 4 or lower.

This year I have another child from another school who is at grade 1 level. It is just heartbreaking. We looked at putting in some funding for a position for a new indigenous pathways coordinator. We asked for \$80 000, but we only got \$50 000. We have not been able to fill this position. I think some of it has to do with having the right dollars to attract that position. We brought this up with Aboriginal Affairs on Friday as well, so we have given this to them as well. The indigenous pathways coordinator — I would like to see one of these at every school, and I would also like to see Swan Hill get a Koori education unit so you can have a coordinated approach with Koori educators and other Koori staff in education. Also, Koori educators need training and such in the whole range of services that you could provide. The other thing is cultural awareness training for teachers. Everyone says that, but we need training that is relevant to teachers. You can go and get cultural awareness training from different areas, but we need specific cultural awareness training relevant to teachers — the real nitty-gritty of why kids do not come to school; how teachers can help with that sort of stuff.

The other thing I would like to give you is feedback from our VAEAI statewide Koori education conference. The highlighted section is primary, which I was in and had some say. I do not know when VAEAI is going to document this or what it is going to do with it, but we were given copies, so I would like to give that to you to have a look at as well. Once you have a look at this you will see the theme running through it.

**The CHAIR** — Okay, thanks. Brendan, anything to add?

**Mr KENNEDY** — Hi. I am Brendan Kennedy. I am the traditional owner here. I have grown up in a family that has had a lot of dependency on the horticultural industry here. Basically the industry that supports most of the community here is the horticultural industry. My background is that I come from a Catholic school. The majority of people of my age went to year 9. That has given a lot of our people of my generation a reasonable foundation to be able to attain certain levels of education and employment. I believe our indigenous kids of today do not have even the particular level of literacy and numeracy of my generation. I believe the education levels of our kids of today are way below the standard of the mainstream. Particularly our isolation, the remoteness of our communities here, makes it so much more difficult in having to travel to attain any sort of education levels, particularly a university education or any other higher employment. They have to travel and leave their families, so that is extremely difficult.

**The CHAIR** — But then if we just have a look, Brendan, at the issue of getting up to — I mean, we are hearing from you that it is often getting to year 9, year 10, year 11 and then to year 12 that is a challenge?

**Mr KENNEDY** — Exactly.

**The CHAIR** — Presumably there is a secondary school in the region generally where you live. What do you think the issues are that are, as you are saying, causing a lot of the young people to go backwards so that they are even struggling to get the end of years 9 and 10?

**Mr KENNEDY** — The main issue is — and speaking for my generation — English is our second language. That needs to be understood by the government of today. I am sure that was understood by the governments of the past. The English language is our second language. And today we have basically a third language, which is a combination. We are speaking our language, we are speaking the English language, and there is also a combination of Australian slang and European language. There is that language issue as well. I have worked in mental health; I have worked in sport and recreation; I have worked for mainstream companies; and now I am working in education in TAFE. What I have noticed so far in my short term here is that the Koori educators are being relieved of the roles they were supposed to have.

The government approach towards Koori education was about getting good culturally appropriate people into the schools and the education system to make it more cultural, and for our people to access the education that is available. Even having said that, for our kids this is a second language, and when you throw in your numeracy and all your subjects you can imagine. We interact here in Robinvale with people who come from overseas. Asians and foreign people come into our communities. Can you imagine how hard that is for them? I am not saying for indigenous people it is at that level but that gives you an understanding of where our community comes from, when you consider the barriers that are in place as well.

I will not go through all the issues because I am sure you have got a fair idea of the issues but firstly I would like to see all the education institutions and also the job networks have Koori liaison officers or people in there who are trained or have that experience in engaging with indigenous communities. I will leave it at that for you to think about.

**Mr MOSER** — Can I pick up on that question as well? From Sue's discussion, and from Brendan's, and from mine, and having been employed as a career educator in previous job roles and a couple of other different things, we still have some fundamental problems irrespective of a number of strategies that have been put forward over recent years.

We continue within the indigenous community to have discussions around the issue that there is not enough being done around cultural awareness training and cultural awareness delivery within the schools as a PD activity for teachers, yet we within the indigenous community sit on the outside and we can see that schools are undertaking PD in languages of other areas, studies of other countries and those sorts of things, which continually reminds us that we are the forgotten mob here to some degree.

If we are going to start to address the issue of getting some of our kids into higher education and the things that Sue spoke about in terms of grade 5, grade 6 and grade 4, there need to be some real outcomes from the Wannik strategy that was recently released and what that means at a grassroots level in the Loddon Mallee region of north-west Victoria — for Mildura, Robinvale, the Swan Hill mob or the Kerang mob — what is the outcome of that as a document and as a strategy in regard to addressing some of those PD criteria.

In our mind we see that if staff have an understanding of our cultural background and some of the tools to be able to communicate far more effectively, to engage far more effectively with our mob, then we are more likely to get our kids through to years 7, 8, 9 and on. That is going back to a primary school area that is having an impact on some of that higher education contribution.

There are some issues around curriculum. When you start to get into the secondary school, if you move through from year 7 through to again year 10, there are some huge gaps in terms of some of that cultural stuff in terms of our mob within this local setting, which really, at the end of the day, leaves the message and the badging for our Koori kids as one that starts to undermine self-esteem and those sorts of things.

We have some historical luggage that we carry with us as a whole community and Brendan has touched on that issue about being boxed or badged into certain things. The reality for our mob up here in Robinvale is that if you are not employed, you are likely to be offered employment within a certain sector which is the horticultural industry, which does not necessarily equate with what all of our mob want to be doing, but if our mob want to move on and go further, we do not necessarily now have the opportunities to be able to do that if our kids have started to fall out of the system around that year 8, year 9 area. Some of the things that Sue was talking about at a primary school level are important for us if we are going to start to address the other end, the year 11 and year 12.

There are some things, again within communities, that our mob are looking for and needing in terms of some of that career transition stuff that we are not able to afford our kids. Maybe other sectors of the community are not able to do it that well either. If we start to talk about universities and higher education just within this Loddon Mallee context — and certainly from Swan Hill back up to Mildura — the reality for us is that we need some sort of model that is a blended model, which offers us the opportunity to be able to tap into a range of providers or courses within our region, that again has some bearing and some connection from the cultural element, but which also leads into activities where we then start to participate within the wider community in the sense of contributing to the economy or the drive or the aspirations of local areas.

When we start to talk about planning and those sorts of things, whilst schools — whether they be secondary or higher education — might have a bit of a plan mapped out about where they see themselves being positioned in 5

or 10 years time, it does not necessarily mean that our mob is part of that equation because we are always left out at the last minute, or only considered at the last minute.

In terms of some of the providers that have been around, we are just part of a numbers game, and that has been demonstrated time and again with some of the training stuff that has happened in various formats. We have some negativity that we need to work around, and we have some issues in terms of real delivery at a grassroots level, and about how we do that as a whole community across all of government. That is the challenge for our mob, and I just wanted to pick up on a few points that were made by some people.

**Mr KOTSIRAS** — Can I just ask on that whether you know of any TAFEs or universities that offer good programs for Aboriginal students?

**Mr MOSER** — My brother boy down here, Brendan, is working with Sunraysia Institute of TAFE. He is probably best placed to talk about that.

**Mr KENNEDY** — What we have is a certificate in general education for adults. We have a mixture of young indigenous teenagers who are being mentored by older indigenous people. That is going really well. We are hoping to tap into the cultural arts. We talked today with the campus manager and our Koori unit manager about creating a pathway for our people to enter into the arts sector through cultural arts. Hopefully, that will create an opportunity for them to go into the international arts area.

Also we have students enrolled in certificates in children's services, which is an area that as we look back to our younger kids we see that indigenous kids need extra attention at a young age, so our community has identified that we need to train our community members to work in children's services and in education. They are the three main programs we have running at the Robinvale campus. We do not actually have a Koori unit. Basically we are a sub-Koori unit to the main Koori unit in Mildura. Swan Hill has a Koori unit as well but we do not, in fact, have a Koori unit here. I would like to see a Koori unit here. I would also like to see a KODE school here as well. Robinvale is a place that needs a Koori Open Door Education Centre as well as the mainstream education providers.

I know of a kid who is 8-years-old who has not been to school for three years. I know kids who are now 15 or 16 years who have not been to school for four or five years. I know of a kid who is not indigenous who has gone through and attained year 12 who does not have basic literacy and numeracy skills. A lot of people in our communities cannot tell the time. They do not feel it is necessary to have any sort of education. That needs to be addressed in Robinvale. I am sure it is the same in Mildura and in Swan Hill — every community in Australia where there are indigenous people.

**Mr MOSER** — There are a number of providers across the state that are good providers and who are offering good courses. It does not matter whether you talk about Ballarat or you talk about Deakin — and maybe Sue is best placed to talk about Deakin because she attends there — or whether it be Albury or places outside of the state, given Albury is in New South Wales anyway.

The reality for our mob is that it starts to come down to the difficulties within our community about transport and about the fact that people within their family, within their home, have to be able to assist younger ones, if they are getting to that stage, to be able to head to university, and a lot of our fellows are returning to higher education as mature-aged students after they come out of the system, which is an added burden, depending on the payment levels you are on or which program you are receiving assistance from.

So whilst there are a number of providers around outside of this location that are offering a range of predominantly good programs and courses for our mob, the reality is that there are probably few of our mob who are heading away from community or home as such, and we would be well placed or better positioned if we had some sort of blended model, with a range of universities or registered training authorities (RTOs) offering stuff within our own locations to be able start to build on that.

From a Swan Hill perspective, I can look around the community and see a number of people within our community who talk about moving on or trying to access university stuff, but the reality is our mob are not moving out of the community. We need to start to get a little bit smarter about what programs we are offering or how we are delivering them, whether it be on a part-time basis or a mixture, to be able to start getting some of our younger fellows more interested in and moving through some of the education pathways.

I alluded to Sue being at Deakin. I do not know if you want to say anything about that, as a student, Sue?

**Ms CONNELLY** — There are a few of us who are doing it at Deakin. It is 7 hours on the train. And it is not just us; non-indigenous people do that too, I suppose.

**The CHAIR** — You go for blocks, do you?

**Ms CONNELLY** — Yes.

**The CHAIR** — We have of course spoken to the Deakin Koori unit when we were down in Colac.

**Ms CONNELLY** — But like Lawrence was saying, some blended type of thing — if you could do your first year of teaching in Swan Hill, that would be brilliant. It is too late to be doing it; it really is. I have three children in secondary, and I am brainwashing them every day, saying, ‘You’re going to university. You’re going to university.’ But what will happen when they go? I will have to shift with them because, as a Koori mum, I am not sending my child to Melbourne with all these horror stories. Two soldiers were stabbed in Greensborough over the weekend. It is just that we have our extended family here and, really, why should we move out when this is where we are from and where we live and where all our connections are?

So there are ways to do it, and other places have done it in bits and pieces. I think if we look at trying to do it, we will come up with alternatives and we will do it, instead of saying, ‘I don’t know how I will keep going to Deakin.’ A couple of other girls doing it are younger than I am, and I am already hearing that they have not been going, so it will all fall apart for them, I guess. But you try not to look at it that way. We all have to try and support each other, and that is why I go back to this Koori education unit. As Koori educators we are doing some transition stuff with preschool into year 7, but we need to strengthen our Koori educators. They have been around for 20 or 30 years.

We are not the solution to this. The teachers are not solving the issues of our kids either. We need to be looking at some different things; some relevant cultural awareness, and letting our fellows get together in a unit to strengthen our communities and ourselves. We could do with some training as Koori educators ourselves, or just meeting and being able to swap ideas and all that sort of stuff and produce some booklets maybe. I mean, if we got together and we got a bit of training ourselves we could run this cultural indigenous stuff for teachers because we have been in the schools, just all those sorts of things.

**Mr HERBERT** — Thank you very much for that; that was my first question, Sue, about Koori educators.

**Ms CONNELLY** — Okay.

**Mr HERBERT** — I have three questions, if that is okay. Firstly, in terms of the role of Koori educators: as you say, they have been around for a long time. It is a pretty tough job for many people I have spoken to in the past. It is also a job that seems to be part social work, part community activist and part educationalist. Do you think there is a role for focusing Koori educators on education as much as you can in terms of education in school, a cultural focus?

**Ms CONNELLY** — The trouble is you have got to get our children to school first and that is why you get all that other stuff.

**Mr HERBERT** — I guess that is what I am asking. Is there a kind of role for two different kinds of people? One for Koori education in the schools and focusing on the school curriculum and what is happening to the kids who have a chance of kicking on and keeping them there, and then some other type of group in terms of getting them there.

**Ms CONNELLY** — I spoke about the indigenous pathways coordinator position. Our committee got together but it only got \$50 000 when we wanted \$80 000. If you have a look at that job description, because we are biased, you will see it is pretty good. I feel that Koori educators should be more in the school doing Koori cultural lessons — this is my personal opinion — for all kids, from prep up, and that is part of what I am able to do.

**The CHAIR** — And that sort of thing is not happening in any of the schools?

**Ms CONNELLY** — It depends how many children you have got. I have 20 children, but I have 40 Koori parents who come with those children and so I have 60, however you want to say it, the department calls them



clients, or whatever, but the Koori educator at our other primary school has 60-odd Koori children, so he has 120 parents as well. Because I have 20 Koori children I have more time to do lessons in classroom, so I can actually do Koori lessons.

This is still my personal opinion; I am not a qualified teacher. Supposedly it is not my job to sit down, and if one of our children is in grade 6 and only has grade 1 level, what am I going to do to help, really?

This indigenous pathways coordinator does transition stuff, works with parents on transition, and that will go a long way to some of those things. I believe you need more positions. Like I keep saying, the Koori education unit could be made up of a coordinator, these pathways indigenous coordinators in the school, and Koori educators. With the strength of that, that is when you will start seeing our kids going into tertiary and further education.

**Mr MOSER** — I do not think you can have Koori educators employed across a whole gamut of roles with the expectation, as it has been over the last 30-odd years by principals or school staff. You either have Koori educators who are social worker related and welfare related in that context and doing that part of it, or you have Koori educators who are within the classroom and doing some sort of coeducational teaching stuff. You cannot have your cake and eat it on this one. It just becomes a horror story for the KE workers who have to live in the communities and work with the community. It then becomes an issue within the schools as to whether they have another resourcing position.

One of the things that the KEs certainly could and should be utilised for, and again these are the areas that we are lacking in when we start to look at this higher education picture, is that we do not have the data collection going on that we need; we do not have an accurate picture of where we are being represented or underrepresented; we do not have the sharing of that data collection between the commonwealth and the states, and therefore when we go to, for example, a university to try to entice them to come to our community we do not have an accurate picture. Predominantly we do not have local government as part of that picture participating in this holistic plan for our mob.

If you look at the scenario of Robinvale as a community, the indigenous mob within the community and the Robinvale economy as a booming economy — if you look at the horticultural industry — in terms of the emerging economy that is growing out of that for a whole facet of other industries that are attached to it, our mob as indigenous people are not getting a slice of that.

We are not being afforded the opportunities to become the accountants or the town planners or to participate proactively. It is always at the lower end of the scale in terms of the labouring stuff and those sorts of things. The expectations are very low for our mob in that, 'This mob are not going to get past year 7 or 8 and therefore they are going to be in this sort of stream'. And yet I reflect on the fact that 18 months ago we did an exercise in Swan Hill, again with the Koori educators as part of this process in some of the schools. We had 120-odd Koori kids who came along to a day that we ran. We called it 'Our mob working around aspirations'. We had 120 children sitting around in table format scenario doing things around, 'This is my vision; this is what I see myself doing if I was a business person or employed in a job role'.

What that started to show us within the context of the Swan Hill community was that the data is not being kept or shared or made available for the thinkers, whoever they may be, or the shapers of communities or higher education providers, about what the Swan Hill mob want at a grass roots level. In terms of some of the roles of the KEs I think that is where there are some things that are missed.

**Mr HERBERT** — I will just ask one more question — —

**Ms CONNELLY** — Could I just add to that: in my role doing Koori cultural lessons I believe the success we have had in different things all boils down to KEs supporting parents to support their own children, and making sure that parents are resourced. We even run mini-sessions on public speaking and how to pronounce words when you are reading to your child. We just do heaps of that sort of stuff. Parents now come into the school and volunteer to do those things.

**The CHAIR** — Good.

**Ms CONNELLY** — I think it is all about supporting parents to support their own kids, because when they move on from primary we have just got to be able to do it ourselves and not become dependent on teachers and

whoever. As a teacher I see sometimes that they seem to keep the parent out of the picture. It is just never going to work like that.

**The CHAIR** — It is a matter of building a good partnership, that is right.

**Mr HERBERT** — It is not something you have been talking about, it is something I am quite interested in, and that is technology. Today technology — computers, internet access — is a crucial part of learning for any young person who wants to go on; that is the truth of it. Like any other kids Koori kids love technology. In terms of computers at home and internet access at home, what is the percentage, and is that a major disadvantage for Koori kids in terms of the way they are learning?

**Mr KENNEDY** — It is non-existent.

**Ms CONNELLY** — If your parent does not work, don't even think about it.

**Mr HERBERT** — That must be quite a disadvantage for many young Koori kids in terms of going through their school life.

**Mr KENNEDY** — It certainly is, yes. In the lower grades at school they have computers in their rooms but so far as in the homes — I talked to a guy the other day. He worked in the horticultural industry for 25 years. He said to me, 'I am out of the paddock now. I am driving a tractor'. He got out of the paddock and is driving a tractor now so he stepped up. That is where we are.

**Mr HERBERT** — In terms of getting computers and internet access in the home, what is the situation?

**Mr KENNEDY** — You need a TV in the house. Kids do not need to go to school, let alone need a computer. They need an Xbox before they need a computer. When I was in school I learned Italian. I am now middle aged and I am just starting to learn my grandmother's language. That is how sad the situation is. Stuff like that needs to be put into our education — something that has some relevance to our kids. Indigenous kids do not have the incentive to go to school. The incentive is that down the track you are going to go to university and you are going to get a good job. The way is being created here from their parents and their community groups, whether it be sporting clubs, or whether it be industry. But our kids do not have that. The parents are not all meeting every week about running their businesses or their farms. We do not have that.

**Ms CONNELLY** — So there is no incentive to go to university, but without some blend of that happening in our towns, not only will our fellows suffer, but so will non-indigenous fellows suffer, and our town will not get all that, whatever you want to call it.

**Mr MOSER** — When you ask the IT question it is almost looking back on *Sesame Street* when that was first mooted and put into play for the Hispanic people within the American context. The IT explosion here is almost the scenario of that. *Sesame Street* hit the airwaves, and with the people it was intended for it missed the boat in that the next echelon picked up on it and their kids started watching that particular show and the gap just ballooned in terms of what it was trying to address.

The same goes for the IT equation for our mob: very few of our mob have internet connections at home. In terms of some of the schools that are now starting to move into that IT regime, for example, my young bloke attends Swan Hill North Primary School; Swan Hill North Primary School is rolling out this whole gamut of interactive whiteboards and all those sorts of things, and with that now comes the challenge and schools trying to move ahead with that and having laptop access and all those sorts of things. The school itself is in Swan Hill North. A couple of weeks ago it sent home a survey about whether or not parents would be interested in buying laptops for their children at a reduced cost. Now some families can afford to do that, but the majority of the families attending Swan Hill North probably will not be able to. So again that explosion and that gap will take place there, so we will have the haves and have-nots.

Certainly even within my own family context, looking at my two sisters and my nieces and nephews, in my home we have been fortunate enough to have internet access and all the rest of it, and my kids thrive on it and are developing from it; in terms of their use of it they run rings around their father. In terms of my nieces and nephews, who do not have that access, it really shows up in a classroom setting, particularly in years 8 and 9, particularly for

my nieces. You have got to wonder what that means for our community, as an indigenous community, honestly, about what that will do in terms of that gap we already have. It will just be horrendous.

So the challenge for us as communities — for the whole community and not just the indigenous community — is that whilst we might have an element of an affluent population within the community in certain sectors, what are we doing about bringing the rest along for the ride, if we are this clever country?

**Ms CONNELLY** — If you look at, say, grade 1s now and if you track them to secondary school, if they have not had computers at home it has to show up, they are so far behind. You cannot do your homework unless you have got a computer.

**Mr HERBERT** — Thank you. Maybe it is something for the federal government. As it rolls out the computers in school, maybe we need some different models.

**Ms CONNELLY** — Pass it on.

**Mr KENNEDY** — I think in this age with the mobile phones, a lot of our people do not have the home phone line on at all. They cannot afford to have the phone on because of the bill so they go for the prepaid mobile phones; it is a lot cheaper.

**The CHAIR** — We need to move on. Thank you very much for your contribution and for sharing with us a broad range of issues that obviously affect indigenous people in the area. We are running about a quarter of an hour behind time now.

**Mr MOSER** — A question: what happens with this information that you are collecting and collating? Where does it go to from here? What happens with it?

**The CHAIR** — We will be putting together a report. We are doing two inquiries at one time. The report on this inquiry will be completed in the first half of next year, and we still have a number of hearings to collect information. We will be doing more information collecting in the latter half of this year, but certainly into next year. The report will go to the state government and be released publicly before the end of June next year. Then the government has to make a formal response to the report we make. Presumably it will have recommendations that will relate not just to our state government but also to the federal government and to communities and so on.

**Mr HERBERT** — Before that happens, of course, Hansard will type this all up and you will be given a copy of it to check that it is factual in relation to what you have said and for comment. Once that is done it will be publicly available for people to look at.

**Mr MOSER** — Once it is publicly available then we are able to utilise that as a document?

**The CHAIR** — Yes, that is right.

**Mr HERBERT** — You will get a copy of it first to check that it is accurate.

**Mr MOSER** — No worries. Thank you very much.

**The CHAIR** — If you want to liaise with us in regard to that or through the LLEN, we can ensure you get that feedback.

**Mr MOSER** — My reason for asking that is that a number of the local indigenous networks are moving into a community planning phase. I am sure there is information that we will come across that may be useful across the Swan Hill–Robinvale–Mildura communities.

**The CHAIR** — That would be useful.

**Witnesses withdrew.**



# CORRECTED VERSION

## EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

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

Robinvale — 2 June 2008

#### Members

Mr M. Dixon

Mr N. Elasmarr

Mr P. Hall

Dr A. Harkness

Mr S. Herbert

Mr G. Howard

Mr N. Kotsiras

Chair: Mr G. Howard

Deputy Chair: Mr N. Kotsiras

#### Staff

Executive Officer: Ms K. Ellingford

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

Administrative Officer: Ms N. Tyler

#### Witness

Ms. D. Quin, regional migration coordinator, Swan Hill Rural City Council.

**The CHAIR** — Sorry we are running late, but as you have seen, there are a lot of issues to try to cover. We will move straight on with you, if you are happy about that. I understand you are keen to get back to Swan Hill when we finish this. As regional migration services coordinator, there are a number of issues that we thought would be relevant for you to share with us in regard to our inquiry.

**Ms QUIN** — Thank you for the opportunity. I know it is a little bit outside your brief, but it is important because it is a new and emerging issue that will affect secondary college and access to higher education in a fairly remote regional centre such as Swan Hill.

Just to give you a bit of background, the new and emerging communities in Swan Hill are mainly from the Sudanese and Afghani cohort. We have 40 young people who are predominantly Sudanese and Afghani now attending secondary school, and a further 55 — —

**The CHAIR** — This is in Swan Hill?

**Ms QUIN** — That is just in Swan Hill, and a further 55 are attending the English language classes at TAFE through the funded Adult Multicultural Education Service (AMES) program that they are entitled to as humanitarian refugees. I suppose it is no surprise — and all of you are most likely very aware — that obviously the young refugee cohort is a very vulnerable group, especially, I suppose, in our regional areas, where we do not have access to the English language intensive school program that people have in Melbourne if they arrive and settle in Melbourne. One of the factors impacting on young refugee arrivals is obviously the language barrier. They obviously find it difficult to cope with the language. Some of them are illiterate in their own language; some of them have had no schooling or very disrupted schooling, if they have lived in refugee camps for a long time. A lot of the Afghani families have been living in Pakistan for the last seven or eight years waiting for their visas to join their fathers and husbands.

What we have found, I suppose — and I am speaking on behalf of and as a member of a community issues group that has been working with and assisting refugees, predominantly the men assisting their families to get to Australia and to Swan Hill — that has been our biggest issue is the lack of understanding at the secondary school level of the needs and cultural backgrounds of these kids. For the last two years ESL support has been virtually non-existent at the secondary college, and it has only been through advocating and going to particular bureaucrats to voice our concerns that they have now got a little bit more interested in it. But for the last two families that arrived we have used volunteers on an intensive basis to tutor the children outside the school setting. Obviously schools get funding, and what we have been trying to advocate with them is that because at the secondary school, the public school, it is predominantly all the Afghani students who go there, there is probably no reason why it cannot be like at the Swan Hill North Primary School where they have employed a multicultural teachers' liaison who is Dari speaking; she is an Afghani woman. The secondary college, for some reason, has not looked at that. That is what we believe would be very valuable. It has an Australian teachers' aide who helps the disabled and also the ESL students.

Feedback is that the kids get a little bit lost in the whole system; it is very daunting. And most of them, we find from speaking to the families, have got aspirations for their children to go on to study. They see that Australia is giving their family an opportunity, and most of them — unlike what we were hearing before — have computers and are very much into having their kids access that and have the internet at home. So they are very aware of technology and of keeping up with that and are very supportive of getting their kids to school regularly, on a day-by-day basis.

The problem, and where they fall through the gaps, is if they have no English: they are sitting in a class and really are not getting anything. That is our biggest concern. The other big issue, and where I think in other areas they have had a sort of connection teacher or a counsellor or a multicultural aide, is in assisting them to learn about the whole education system: what the career pathways and education pathways are. These children do not understand what a dietician is or what a physiotherapist is. They have no understanding of some of the occupations and professions that would be open to them if they got to that level of education where they look for further education. I suppose that is one of our biggest issues, and it is for all the disengaged kids that fall through the gaps in secondary school. That is probably where we are losing them. They are not studying perhaps the right subjects and they are being put into groups that they think they should be in instead of looking at what their own needs and aspirations are.

Just on some positive notes, our local community has been very proactive through the Swan Hill Settlement Committee, which is a subcommittee of the Rural City of Swan Hill council and the Murray Mallee LLEN. We

have formed a network; it is for migrants and education and is looking at employment and education pathways not only for refugee children but also for migrant children who are coming with the skilled migrant parents who are now taking up work in the Swan Hill area. It is about looking at and identifying the issues and gaps in education, training and employment affecting migrant and refugee families, in particular the young people. That network, if it really comes together and has all the major stakeholders, will hopefully have some impact on letting people be made more aware of what the actual issues are when you are dealing with kids who are coming from very different cultural backgrounds.

I understand that it is all very new. Swan Hill has been fairly monoculture except for our indigenous community, but now that we have very visible different communities in our community it is time that the education sector caught up. It is a fairly inflexible, structured system and I think people need to change their whole way of thinking about how they deal with young people who have come from very different cultural backgrounds.

**The CHAIR** — Are we getting a sense of how long it is taking for some of these students to gain a grip on English? I guess it depends on their age group when they start.

**Ms QUIN** — It also depends on their family. A family that arrived two weeks ago had absolutely no English at all, whereas some of the men have actually paid for their eldest child to have tutoring in Pakistan so that they have come with some understanding of English. The little ones pick it up very quickly. It is a little bit more difficult for the teenage group but it just depends on each individual. Fatima, for instance, has been at the college two years and speaks very good English — we use her as an interpreter — and she has already mapped out that she wants to be an accountant, and I believe she will get there.

**The CHAIR** — There are some examples of some potential success stories.

**Ms QUIN** — It has probably been with no help from the secondary school, and she will tell you that. Two years ago when she started at the school there was nothing. There was no ESL. It was the volunteer tutoring outside of school that got her to where she is today.

As for skilled migrants and also some of the refugees, I think a lot of them have got skills. Some of them were businesspeople or did have professional careers before they escaped their countries, and certainly for skilled migrants the issue is around that recognition of overseas qualifications. That is where I think bridging courses and access to that further education post-secondary is vital. If we had some access to university upskilling or bridging courses it would be a huge benefit to the Swan Hill region.

**The CHAIR** — So some of the parents of the children or the people who are arriving have skills and qualifications that they are bringing with them?

**Ms QUIN** — Yes, that is right. For instance, we have one Sudanese gentleman who we assisted to get an engineering position at the Shire of Gannawarra. He had studied in Sudan as well as Egypt when he was there, before he became a humanitarian refugee. It can be done. They were very supportive in assisting him to upskill in AutoCAD and things like that. Some of the other families that have moved to our region are probably underemployed. Some of the other more skilled migrants are underemployed because, employers say, of that lack of Australian experience. If they cannot get a job in their career occupation area, what they need to be doing is doing some bridging courses that will actually help them get a job in their own field.

**Mr KOTSIRAS** — Deborah, do you know of any instances in any of the schools of racism with these new communities that are coming in? Have you noticed anything in schools which makes it harder for the students to continue?

**Ms QUIN** — There have only really been a couple of instances that have come to our attention, and it is just plain ignorance. I think that is where the schools need to be doing a lot more cross-cultural training. Some of the kids have no idea about what these kids have been through, where they come from and what the torture and trauma of war and separation have been. Again, they are just left to themselves. One recent example was a boy being bullied. He was just walking through and some young blokes decided to try and push him and to engage. Those sorts of things happen but it is limited.

**Mr KOTSIRAS** — How do you overcome the aspirations of the parents, especially with the daughters where in most cases they do not see them as going on to university?

**Ms QUIN** — It is interesting.

**Mr KOTSIRAS** — How do you overcome that?

**Ms QUIN** — I think we have to step back and say that is their culture and the way they do it. Most of them have encouraged the older daughters, if they are not eligible for secondary school, still to go to the English classes at TAFE. We have one young Afghani woman who is in her early twenties who is attending our Adult Education Centre. Some of the men have been here a little bit longer and they understand what the education pathways are and Australian society's expectations, but there are still families who are taking their daughters back to get married and will bring their husbands back. I do not think that will change until maybe some of the kids that we have in primary school now are through. It will be a gradual change.

**Mr KOTSIRAS** — So there is no community support to attempt to assist those families?

**Ms QUIN** — Yes. We have a lot of volunteers who work very closely as family liaison-types or friendly visitors, and we have community picnics so that we try to educate them in what women's roles can be in Australia and that education is power. We encourage them. I joke around with a lot of the guys that I work with: 'This is good. Your daughter will be going to school'. One recent one whose daughter was 20 said, 'No. No. She will stay at home with her mother'. But she is going to English classes so I do not think we can step in and sort of direct them that much. We need to do it subtly.

**Mr KOTSIRAS** — How do you overcome the financial difficulties for some of these children once they reach year 12 to get on to university, especially if they have to go somewhere else to undertake the course?

**Ms QUIN** — That has been talked about, particularly with the Afghani family whose daughter is very keen to go to university. Currently she is in year 11. The family is prepared to move to a regional centre. They will not be able to send her away, and they would not probably allow that, but again that is going to be difficult for them. They have all their supports and all their community networks in Swan Hill, and even to move to Bendigo where there really is not an Afghani population is going to be a very difficult move for them but they are prepared to do that. But if we had something that she could do in Swan Hill it would be much better of course.

**Mr KOTSIRAS** — Are the TAFE or the university assisting in any way? Programs?

**Ms QUIN** — No.

**Mr KOTSIRAS** — Assistance? Scholarships?

**Ms QUIN** — We will certainly look at that as we get closer to that. The business and professional women's group in Swan Hill offers scholarships to assist young women going to study. But certainly our community issues group will look strongly at that. We have provided quite a lot of finance to kids to access sporting, recreational and also educational opportunities, and that is something that we have supported in the last couple of years.

**The CHAIR** — All right. I think that has given us a pretty good perspective on the issues and the challenges of the refugees, provided there are no other questions. Thank you, Deborah.

**Ms QUIN** — Thank you. I will just leave these if you want them.

**The CHAIR** — Good luck with it all, Deborah.

**Witness withdrew.**



# CORRECTED VERSION

## EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

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

Robinvale — 2 June 2008

#### Members

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

Chair: Mr G. Howard

Deputy Chair: Mr N. Kotsiras

#### Staff

Executive Officer: Ms K. Ellingford

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

Administrative Officer: Ms N. Tyler

#### Witnesses

Ms J. Grigg, manager, rural business,

Mr R. Cadmore, pathways coordinator, and

Ms T. Pearce, manager, student services and residences, Sunraysia Institute of TAFE.

**The CHAIR** — The committee welcomes Sunraysia Institute of TAFE. Are you starting, Ray?

**Mr CADMORE** — We will start at the other end with Jen.

**The CHAIR** — Jenny is starting. You are the one that we did not have listed, Jenny.

**Ms GRIGG** — That is right; my apologies.

**The CHAIR** — But anyway it is appropriate that we certainly hear from Sunraysia Institute of TAFE. We went to the Mildura campus this morning before we came down to Robinvale. It is obviously appropriate in terms of the things that we have heard today. We heard from La Trobe earlier that that opportunity of moving from TAFE into tertiary is significant, but also the opportunities of the students to go into TAFE is something that is relevant to us too. Jenny, you are speaking first.

**Ms GRIGG** — Yes. My role within TAFE is manager of rural business, but I manage the Robinvale campus and the Mallee campus based in Ouyen as well. I actually live around that Mallee area, so I know that. Ray has a new role within TAFE. He is a pathways coordinator, which is the new role we have created. It is looking at the pathways between the secondary colleges and TAFE. Tania is manager of student services, our support network. I am actually going to handball to Ray to kick off with a few words from his pathways role.

**Mr CADMORE** — If we just talk a little bit about what Sunraysia TAFE is doing now, particularly in moving people through VET in schools, or schools to TAFE, and TAFE to university, my role as a coordinator is VET coordinator and articulation. There is an important role there in developing articulation agreements with universities and developing a means to drive our students from school as they come into the VET sector and the TAFE sector and then giving them the opportunity to move through into accredited programs with universities.

To that end, I will need to be talking to various universities around the place. That will be La Trobe, Deakin, Ballarat and Charles Sturt and various universities over the programs we offer. They may include conservation and land management, horticulture, business, accounting — so across the whole range of TAFE courses. That becomes quite important too in relation to the commonwealth funding for the VET FEE-HELP. That funding will only be accessible to students if the courses they want to enrol in at TAFE have an articulation through to a tertiary sector, so it is a very important thing we need to move on.

Currently, Sunraysia TAFE offers them about 50 VET in Schools programs across north-west Victoria. We are collaborating with 15 secondary schools. We have got about 500 VET in Schools enrolments. We, on a student contact hour equivalent basis for 15 to 19-year-olds, deliver about 90 000 student contact hours or that equivalent per year. We also have an engagement with the New South Wales department of education, and we deliver that to programs in New South Wales — one to Balranald high school and one to the Tooleybuc Central School.

Certificate II level courses, which is where we begin most of our VET in Schools programs, cover building and construction, plumbing, automotive, engineering, conservation and land management, hairdressing, hospitality, cooking, electrotechnology, and so on. For us, in terms of moving people through or developing pathways into higher education, we need to have very strong links to technical institutions and to have outcomes that are based very closely to where people are working and developing the lifelong learning process through that process, as against, say, generalist degrees and things like that.

I know — and I can speak as a father — when I talk to my sons about going to TAFE or uni or what have you, they see there is a gap in the technical subjects they would like to study and they could access through TAFE. They see there is a gap for them in how they would go and approach tertiary institutions about it. A lot of young people really do not understand how to access technical training at a higher level. They are scared; they are wary of the financial costs and the financial burdens they will attract to their families.

They are worried about not so much social isolation; they are worried about their social capital. They oftentimes have a great deal of social capital in their communities. They are pretty well connected. I do not know if you have seen your kids and their text messages as they come and go, but they have great networks in their communities. Once they move away from their communities and they move away for one year or two years, they lose those connections; they are out of the loop. They are not quite so pertinent any more. They are also very scared if they go away to study, they will not come back. That has to do with the social capital they think they are going to lose as well. Study — or at least great chunks of study — within the regions or similar to where students come from is

very important. Social capital is one of the foremost things on the minds of young people I deal with, and certainly my sons. They see that they will lose that connection. They do not necessarily want to go to Melbourne. Oftentimes our young people have had good access and good exposure to the capital cities. They are making up their minds. They are making their value judgements as they go along. Whether they are going down there for sport, they are getting some exposure to the capital cities.

In terms of other restrictions in developing VET programs that can move through schools and TAFE, there are difficulties in the funding models that we apply. TAFE-profile hours cannot be applied to school hours or school students. We have to apply fee-for-service arrangements to those students, which the schools find difficult to respond to and difficult to pay, which basically comes down to another bill coming home for the parents to pay VET fees or TAFE fees. I think we need to somehow look at that formula, because the schools will tell you, 'Yes, we get funded to teach these kids, but that is also going into our capital costs and our fixed costs' — so how that money transfers across is an issue. Fee-for-service revenues for TAFE courses delivered to schools can sometimes be as much as only 10 per cent of a profile-funded or a government-funded TAFE course. It is difficult for TAFE, too, to actually address this market, because the funding gap makes it very hard to really give you depth in it.

Articulation, I touched on before, and the credit matrix, which the Victorian Regulations and Qualifications Authority is working on, will be an important part of it. That also ties to the VET FEE-HELP program. That is important too, which comes through the commonwealth government. I cannot emphasise strongly enough that the credit matrix is due for a rollout in 2010. I think in terms of engaging country people or regional youth or regional people in ongoing, lifelong training that will articulate into higher education, it is a very important process because it gives us recognition of what we do today. It will be recognised. It will be on a statutory body's record going forward. We will all have a student ID number and it will carry with us through our life. I am not sure whether I have covered that right.

Articulation agreements need to be particularly aimed at limiting time away from home or time in the universities. They oftentimes come as a credit here, a credit there and a credit there, across the years. Where the real value will come is if we can line up a credit across the first year and we induct our people into second year when they hit the higher education institution. That limits time away from home, the living expenses and many of the other things that worry people or are concerns for them. I think that covered perceptions a little bit, and social capital I have covered.

There are limited role models oftentimes in regional areas for people who have tertiary education, and oftentimes our civic leaders do not necessarily have a great deal of tertiary education. I think we need to somehow engage those people in the community who do have higher education and make them much more visible to year 9 and year 10 people, so that they see that there are achievements out there. It is a good thing in the sense that we come from regions and we come from communities where people can develop themselves and have developed themselves and worked through, but the way we are going about our business and our need to develop higher education means we have to think about things a little bit differently and we have to introduce people who do have a higher education background. I hope that helps a bit.

**The CHAIR** — We will come back to that with some questions in a moment.

**Ms GRIGG** — I was going to touch on a couple of other issues. I suppose my perspective is from some of the really small communities out in the Mallee region that are fairly isolated and fairly remote. We certainly do have a larger cohort now of disengaged youth. We actually just started a program recently where we partnered the secondary college in Ouyen. The three people at risk of leaving the school have now become involved with TAFE. Ideally we would love them to still be part of the school cohort.

That is where their peers are. They can tap into what we cannot provide in a small rural community. Our Mallee campus is limited in what it provides these young people. At least it keeps them engaged in some form, but if we could partner the school more closely they would still have peer support and other VET programs that the school offers. We have to somehow come to some arrangement that is able to work within the funding models available. That is something we are grappling with as well.

A lot of young people undoubtedly are not engaging in post secondary simply because of the cost factor. There is the cost to their families. Especially in the last 10 years this region has really been on its knees in lots of cases; you are well aware of that.

**The CHAIR** — That is certainly a theme that has been coming through regularly today, both the drop-off in recent times, presumably due to the drought, as well as the general broader issues and the cost of moving.

**Ms GRIGG** — Most people with higher education qualifications in the remote areas are women. They are now working off farm. It is the survival mode in lots of ways, and coupled with isolation it really is just too costly for these young people to move away. If they do, they are trying to access Centrelink. No doubt you have heard too that for independent youth allowance they need that year of work. There are all sorts of issues coupled around the cost of access. A lot of young people supplement with part-time work, but it is the cost of accommodation — and the access to accommodation rental — if they do go to Melbourne.

My own experience is that one of my children was a med student and he could not work part-time, because it is just too hard. He just could not get rental accommodation and half the time was camped on someone's floor, which is hardly conducive to study. Halfway through his fifth-year exams Centrelink cut his payments off because he could not travel from the rural medical school in Wangaratta to Melbourne to attend an interview, so they chopped him off. Luckily we could support him during that period till he could get through the exams and get down there. It is not really what you want as a fifth-year med student, to support your study. That is just one example.

It is the systems that support these young people. There is the Centrelink system, the transport system, and also IT if they can access training in particular remotely. We are putting together programs now where a lot of training is delivered online, but they need to be able access broadband internet — in a lot of these areas you are still on the old dial-up system. That takes another mode of education away from them, or it makes it really difficult when they come home from university to access their library or make simple web searches as well.

I suppose that is a cultural perspective on what some of these people are facing. I am going to hand over to Tania, who is coming from the students services support and the residence part of the institute.

**Ms PEARCE** — I have been requested by the inquiry to provide some information specifically on the Habitat residential complex, so I have got some information here. I am probably not fitting with what Ray and Jenny are talking about. It is more information on accommodation that we provide to students. I have been asked to provide information on student room availability and supply and demand of on-campus accommodation, costs, the criteria we use for assessing the applications, and some background on characteristics. I have focused on La Trobe students who come and stay in residence, because this inquiry is around higher education, and on some of the benefits for students and some of the challenges.

I want to give a brief overview of the residence. It is quite a small residential complex in comparison to some of the larger city universities. In terms of our room availability, we have got 27 single rooms and 15 double or large rooms, so we can accommodate between 42 and 57 students. You may have seen the residential complex today.

**The CHAIR** — Yes.

**Ms PEARCE** — We also have a unit that we use as a motel-type unit for consultants and visiting staff. The costs of occupancy are on page 2, but we are trying to make it as cheap and affordable for students as possible. In comparison to larger areas, I suppose it is a little bit cheaper, but the cost of living in cities is often higher as well. With supply and demand, in terms of our numbers from 2004 to 2008, we are only running it this year on about 70 per cent capacity. In the last couple of years we have seen a drop in students. In terms of our La Trobe students, you will see on the diagram on page 2 that in 2004 we had 23, 20 the following the year and 19, 19, and 12 this year, so we are slightly down on La Trobe students.

We do not have a lot of data on why we are not as full as we have been in the past. I have listed a number of points. We have had a number of long-term students depart over the past couple of years — our second-year diploma students have finished, and three-year bachelor of arts students have finished. They seem to come in a block, so now we have a lot of first-year students who are living in residence.

Some La Trobe students completed their first year at the Mildura campus and had to transfer to Bendigo to complete their second and third year. An example of that was the bachelor of education, which can now be studied

at the Mildura campus. Also, there are some more courses available in our small campuses, such as Swan Hill. There are courses offered in Kerang through TAFE, and also the Robinvale and Ouyen campuses, so that perhaps has had an impact on students coming to live in residence.

In terms of priority of applicants and criteria for assessing those applications, we give priority to students living away from home for the first time, also full-time students and first-year students. Basically at the moment, because we are not at capacity, rooms are available and lots of people can move in. I have listed the criteria for assessing applications. I suppose the key to it is some form of independent living skills, so there are times when we do have to say no to students coming to live in residences. It is usually because they do not have independent living skills. They may be a minor, under the age of 18. We do get 15-year-olds who apply to come and study and do their apprenticeship at TAFE, and students who are seeking long-term accommodation seem to be another that comes up a lot — students who are based in the Mildura area wanting somewhere to stay in the longer term.

**The CHAIR** — Is there any sense of students needing additional support — those ones who are living away from home — because of the fact that they are living away from home? Certainly that is the case for kids going to Melbourne; I do not know whether you would see the same sorts of things for students coming to Mildura.

**Ms PEARCE** — We do. We have some students who arrive who have limited basic independent living skills, so they are not used to cooking a meal and looking after themselves.

**The CHAIR** — Do you have to go along and teach them how to cook? How is that dealt with?

**Ms PEARCE** — Because we have fairly small groups, we have an after-hours support worker. She works from 5.00 p.m. until 7.00 p.m. four nights a week, so she can assist those students with cooking. They might get together in small groups and do laundry and different basic living skills that they are sometimes missing. Homesickness is a big one too, of course, for those students, and sharing communal living facilities. It is complex at times with different expectations around dishwashing, hygiene and all those sorts of things.

**The CHAIR** — So you have some sort of counsellor who is available for them and picks up on some of those issues?

**Ms PEARCE** — Yes. I also manage the student services unit, and we have on the Mildura campus two part-time counsellors and a disability liaison officer and some welfare support officers as well, so they do get referred for that extra support.

**Ms GRIGG** — We actually find that the student services unit is more and more in demand. Even the outlying campuses, because of this disengaged youth cohort that we seem to be picking up, are fairly stretched with those services out there. More and more you can see it. I am thinking of Ouyen here, but a lot of young people are living independently in year 11, and then they are moving into TAFE or are completely disengaged from education, and there seems to be more and more of that cohort as well. It is fairly demanding on Tania's group.

**Ms PEARCE** — The other thing I wanted to highlight, which I find quite interesting, is on page 4 of the submission, and concerns where La Trobe students are coming from in terms of their home addresses. They are coming from everywhere really. This year we had five students from Sydney, but we now have four students who have travelled from Sydney to come and live in residences and study at La Trobe. There is a local group from around the Mallee area that also comes, but we have students who come all the way from Queensland, as well as places like Mornington, St Kilda in Melbourne, so that is quite interesting — the different places everyone is coming from.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you; it is interesting, yes.

**Mr DIXON** — In your submission you talked about whoever wrote the submission having programs as early as primary school to talk to children about aspirations and so on. Are there examples out there that you have seen that might be working in schools?

**Ms GRIGG** — Again this is purely from the Mallee perspective, but we certainly connect with the primary school, not so much in a specific program but in our liaison with the school, and they in turn connect with the secondary college. They are exposed to what TAFE is about and what we can offer. We have talked about how we can, in particular, use the Mallee research station facilities, because we believe there is actually some

disengagement at years 5 and 6 with boys, and we have talked about how we can actually capture those students. But at the moment our system does not. Other than that we can perhaps set up the research facility and capture their interest in agriculture and so on, where they can use that as well. But that is my only understanding — a liaison partnership rather than an actual program itself. We like to be able to do that because I think it is a way of keeping the continuation and preventing them from disengaging at that level.

**Mr DIXON** — Is it just a trend you are starting to pick up here in the country?

**Mr CADMORE** — It is very peer driven. In terms of my own sons, most of their friends' parents are tradesmen or skilled artisans or horticulturalists. They do not come in contact with many kids whose parents have any type of tertiary qualification other than me.

It just becomes a part of their aspects of living — there are people out there doing perfectly well without tertiary qualifications, so why do I need it? What is different about you? Of course the answer is that we need it to be a teacher or whatever it might be. They need to be shown a lot more, starting at primary school, of this pathway through to higher education. It is a real possibility and it can be done.

**Mr KOTSIRAS** — Are you pleased with the way the secondary schools here are communicating to students about TAFE pathways into university courses? Are students aware of the different pathways?

**Mr CADMORE** — Probably not. In fact you can almost certainly say, 'No, they are not really aware of TAFE in that role'. They believe you go to TAFE to learn a trade or learn a skill.

**The CHAIR** — Is it fair to say you are really just getting into that area now, are you not? You have a couple of articulations now that have been developed with La Trobe, but it is still early days and there is a long way to go. Hence your employment?

**Mr CADMORE** — Yes. Even in terms of the material that comes home with my sons, there is a point at which you can articulate through TAFE into higher education — they come under trade streams or higher education streams that kids can look at.

**Mr DIXON** — Also part of that growing articulation is, for example, nursing, which is offered at TAFE and the university. Is that something that you — —

**Mr CADMORE** — TAFE can only offer division 2 nursing, and then you need to talk to the various universities who do articulate. Charles Sturt does, Monash does, to varying degrees. It is a matter of finding which university or higher education institution gives you the best articulation.

**Mr DIXON** — What is your nearest South Australian university? Is there any campus near where we are?

**Mr CADMORE** — No, you are looking at metro, I think.

**Mr HERBERT** — I would like to follow up on a range of questions, but I will only ask one, given the time factor, and that is on this articulation question. We have been talking about articulation for a long time, and there have been a limited number of successes really — a traditional two years of a TAFE course, community services or something like that plus the first year at a university. That is your classic model. What do you think are the major impediments? Everywhere we go everyone talks about the need for articulation, and they have been doing that for many years. What are the major impediments? Is it university academic status? Is it TAFE quality of courses? Is it a lack of synergies between what happens in TAFE and what happens in universities? What do you think the major impediment is?

**Mr CADMORE** — They are different streams. The TAFE sector uses competency-based training through training packages. Universities use curriculum-based courses. Each faculty of the university develops its own curriculum. TAFE uses a nationally accredited training package based on competencies.

That is part of the difficulty. Every time a TAFE institute wants to go and develop an accreditation program for a particular course they are running, they have to talk to each university. They cannot just go and do an articulation agreement with the higher education sector; they need to go and talk to that particular faculty in that university, and that is probably the biggest impediment in moving this forward. It is very time consuming, and TAFE has not

invested in it in the past. It has been a responsibility of individual managers or it has fallen upon an as-needs basis; but TAFE has not strategically developed a role to address that problem.

**Mr HERBERT** — Is there a need for a central strike team or something? You are saying it will just plod on forever. How do you improve this and get things happening a lot faster?

**Mr CADMORE** — I think my role is a pretty good step in the right direction — somebody in an institute who has responsibility for it, and there are other institutes that have people in similar roles to me with similar names. The credit matrix will become a valuable tool. To give you an example, Deakin University, Box Hill Institute of TAFE, South West Institute of TAFE and Gordon Institute of TAFE all have articulation agreements. You can go onto any one of their websites and find out where that particular TAFE course will take you at Deakin University.

**Mr HERBERT** — Excellent.

**Mr CADMORE** — That again highlights a point; those individual institutes, because of the way they deliver their courses or because of the units that comprise their courses, all have different levels of articulation. Articulation is very much on an as-come basis, unit by unit, course by course.

**Ms GRIGG** — It is probably not so much the cultural barriers between the TAFE institutes and the universities, it is the administrative aligning, curriculum — —

**Mr HERBERT** — Lack of a smoother process.

**Ms GRIGG** — It is all of that, yes. It is the processes in between that put the blockers in place and are time consuming. Unless you set someone like Ray's position aside to do that, yes, it is problematic and it takes forever.

**The CHAIR** — Is that all?

**Mr HERBERT** — That is it. I know what a stickler you are for finishing on time.

**The CHAIR** — There are no further questions. Thanks. That helps to round out our day very well. I declare today's hearing at Robinvale adjourned.

**Committee adjourned.**