

CORRECTED VERSION

EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

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

Benalla–3 March 2009

Members

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Witnesses

Ms S. Oakley, assistant principal and VET coordinator, senior school, and
Ms A. Forster, VCE teacher, careers coordinator and work education coordinator, and
Ms M. Levy, VCE graduate 2008, sport and recreation trainee, and
Jasmine Billingsley, school captain, and
Mr P. Marple, school captain, Benalla College

The CHAIR — I'm prepared to declare this hearing of the Parliamentary Education and Training Committee open.

Just in opening, it's terrific to be at Benalla College today to have hearings to hear from people from this region in regard to our inquiry which has a very long name because we're inquiring into the geographical differences in the rate in which Victorian students participate in higher education.

Anyway, I also wish to, in regard to the hearing today, advise that all of the evidence taken is subject to parliamentary privilege and that means that things that are said in this inquiry aren't able to be followed up in the legal situation for matters of if you've –

Mr KOTSIRAS — You can't get sued.

The CHAIR — In introducing ourselves, we've got Peter Hall, Martin Dixon, Karen Ellingford, who is our executive officer, Nazih Elasmr next to me, and Nicholas Kotsiras. Apart from Karen, the five of us are members of parliament in both the Upper House and Lower House in Victoria.

My name's Geoff Howard and it's fair to say we come from a broad range of electorates from country Gippsland, Ballarat East and also from a range of areas in Melbourne, Mornington Peninsula as opposed to Melbourne metropolitan area. So we're really pleased to be here today and particularly pleased to start with our hearing from Benalla College, but before I go on I should also welcome Bill Sykes who is the local MP for this region.

So over to Benalla College. We're pleased to hear from you and so if you'd like to make a brief presentation it's good that we've got a range of students, and Sue Oakley as the assistant principal, and you can introduce the rest of your group and then we will be following up with some questions after you've made your presentation.

Ms OAKLEY — Thanks Geoff, and thank you everyone else for being here. This is such a fantastic opportunity for us and our audience as well.

My name's Sue Oakley. I've been introduced as the assistant principal of the senior campus, so I work with the year 11s and year 12s. There's a junior campus on the other side of Benalla. What I'm going to do today is talk a little bit about a snapshot of Benalla College and how that fits into some of the regional data that you would have been provided with.

I'll also introduce Ann Forster who's our career coordinator and also our work ed coordinator. She has been working at the senior campus for many years and she will be talking about the support provided in the careers centre and the careers programs that we have at Benalla College.

Melanie Levy - and this is not quite the order we were going to talk but never mind. Melanie Levy was a graduate of year 12 last year. She's taking a gap year this year. She will be talking a little bit about her decision to do that and her experiences so far this year as a sport and rec trainee actually employed by the college and what that's meant to her.

If we go further on to Patrick Marple. Pat is one of our school captains. He's going to talk about his achievements so far and his aspirations as far as tertiary education is concerned, also some suggestions in context of his own aspirations and what they might mean to other students who are looking for a tertiary pathway.

Last but not least will be Jasmine Billingsley, and Jasmine is our other school captain. She is going to be talking a little bit about the support the school has provided her so far, but also a number of the barriers that she might face in pursuing tertiary education.

Also I did notice that one of the directions you want are some suggestions and we'd like to focus on some of those today as to how we can solve some of these problems that we're facing.

Just a little bit of a snapshot from me, I did hand out a graph which you probably have been looking at. This is just from an environmental scan that was done in the region, particularly if you look at the north-east tracks data because that actually involves us as a network. We're talking, if you have a look at the summary below, that probably one of the things that we're noticing most is that we have a low percentage of students entering tertiary education and that we have high levels of deferment. The good side is that we do have a high level of apprenticeship and traineeship entry and we really think that that's fantastic, but this problem that we're facing with students deferring seems to be something that's really growing. We've got a good track record of results at Benalla College.

One of the things we were going to talk about today is really from our perspective and our story. Last year we had a means study score of 31 for our VCE students and we had very high enrolments and completion rate of VET and VCAL programs, broad programs well above the State average, so we're not just encouraging students to enrol in those programs but their completion rates and success rates are very, very high.

So we're sort of saying the problem isn't with the programs that we're offering in the way that we're preparing kids for a number of different pathways, but just a little bit of an idea about students who receive tertiary offers. If we looked from 2007 to 2008 we had about 88 per cent of those students who applied for offers, tertiary offers, actually got those, and the same thing happened at the end of last year. We had about 82 per cent who applied who actually got the offers, so we're quite happy again with that track record of students who are applying and who are actually getting to where they want to be. If we had a look, and I did have a look with Ann, at students who are getting their first preferences, that is quite high as well.

One of the things that I guess is a direction and I know it has come out of several reports is this rate of deferment. If we looked from 2007 to 2008 and our cohort then, we had 47 per cent of our students who were offered placements who deferred, and at that stage if you look at that in context of the north-east tracks data, that's actually much higher than what's been presented in these graphs. Already it seems quite alarming and it's actually quite higher in Benalla College. That's why I've invited some students to talk about that issue in particular, but we looked at our data and we're just getting it in from last year 2008 to 2009.

Even though we're trying to find out about another three students of the 43 students that were offered places, we've actually got 55 per cent of them who have already elected to defer this year. So that's fresh data that we picked up on Friday. So the move forward is becoming greater and greater.

I'm going to pass over to a few of our past students and present students to tell their story a little bit and how that fits in the context of the data. Benalla College is only part of the north-east tracks, and north-east tracks is only part of the Hume region, and often you don't hear what is happening with a particular school with particular kids. That's what I was hoping to do today.

Ms BILLINGSLEY — First I'd like to thank you attending this meeting and showing the initiative of dealing with the low level of rural students attending higher education. I'd like to discuss the assistance that we receive in choosing a possible career, barriers that we face in attending university, my personal situation and some possible solutions.

The programs that we have been offered at Benalla College to help us pursue the careers that we are interested in are excellent, and that's run by Anne Forster and is located in a room downstairs. Ann Forster gives up her time and helps us decide what we'd like to do and then follows up by finding programs and university and TAFE courses. We also attend open days and career forums such as the age careers expo.

Some barriers that we face now are the lack of access to university facilities and programs. Living in the country and attending a smaller school means that the students have a variety of career pathways they'd like to pursue which means the school can't possibly cater for every single student.

We face the problem that the school can't possibly take us down altogether on a trip. We can't possibly do that because they can't cater for every single student.

Some problems that we might face later in life when we actually attend university: the locality of universities. This means country students cannot live at home while studying at university. The distance of universities are too far for students to attend and also the lack of transport and access to transport makes it nearly impossible for students to live at home whilst studying at university. By the majority of universities being situated in Melbourne, it means that rural students have less of a choice in choosing their university as they have to take into account living factors and also financial factors. Their choice in university might be tainted because they have to consider where they can live and also where their possible fund of income will be.

A number of students rely on part-time work which means that they can't just go down to university and choose the best course for them. They have to figure out where they could possibly live and where's the best place to find a job.

In my situation most of these barriers affects me because I come from a single parent family who relies on welfare payments. I want to study social work at RMIT or Monash but living factors and financial factors means that I might not be able to choose the best course for me.

Some possible solutions that we have come up with cover all students needing further exposure to the possibilities that higher education can offer, by showing students, rural students, exposing them to sort of encourage them to participate and want to get involved and improve their education. We suggested this by involving more funding for students to attend open days and also by making free transport days on these open days. Also changes to the Victorian transport system creating easier access and more regular timetabling for rural towns would make it easier for students to, say, live in Benalla but also study at La Trobe University in Albury-Wodonga.

Also further accommodation for uni students is needed and also lowering the cost of uni living. Universities need to provide for space on residence available for students living in rural Victoria.

Thank you again for your time and we will be joining you for morning tea. If you'd like to ask us any further questions, I'll be there.

The CHAIR — Thank you Jasmine.

Mr MARPLE — My name's Patrick Marple, and I would personally like to firstly thank you all for taking the time and the effort to discuss and listen to our respective points of view as a rural community.

I would like to elaborate on some of the points that Jasmine made as well as also discussing my own, and what that might mean for students within rural and regional areas.

Aspiration. As a student of Benalla College I've already achieved numerous accolades in the field of academia, both in science and philosophy. I completed VCE biology last year as a fast-track year 12 student and received a straight A plus score. Having received a score of 97 per cent I was hoping to enter higher education and hopefully study both evolutionary biology and philosophy at Melbourne University.

To make this aspiration a reality I would need city accommodation, a part-time job, support and connection with others as well as developing life skills such as independence and living in the city as an individual.

I'm fortunate as I already have family and close family friends who live in the city and who have offered their support to me for when I move down. As well as this my parents have also set up a trust fund which means that I have access to money while I'm at university for everyday living costs such as food, rent, those kind of issues, and as parents they provided me with numerous times in which to experience living in the city, so they take me down

on occasion so I'd know what it's like to live there and the differences that exist between city life and country life and I've also a pre-set pathway for part-time work in the city as well as having done the TAFE course in retail which enables me to go down to the city, and it's an easier way for me to get a job down there. I'm fortuitous enough to be comfortable with living and studying for higher education in the city.

However, as the majority of rural students do not have the means or the access to this kind of support network, and we believe the problematic situation exists and could be alleviated by Government trying to mimic this safety net through certain initiatives and programs.

The principal issue we believe is that of a community in that when you live in a rural community there's a feeling of connectedness, everyone knows each other, it's a very good support network to have, and students when they move to the city lose this kind of network, this kind of connectivity. We think that in particular residential accommodation in universities particularly helps maintain that sense of community, and as there are not many places as in there aren't enough opportunities to get into these residential areas, there isn't the available accommodation for a lot of rural students.

As well as it being very expensive, it's very hard for us to maintain that, to get into those areas. We think that perhaps a lowering of the price or providing initiatives, being money provided more by the government for rural students to be able to stay in these residential communities as well as more of the accommodation being available, the universities being given the incentive to make more of this accommodation, to build more and to make more available.

That's my personal story and what I really wanted to say, and again I'd like to thank you all for coming and I'll pass it on to Mel.

Ms LEVY — I just wanted to talk about my experience about why I've chosen to have a gap year. I've deferred my place. I got into La Trobe University in Bundoora, so I am planning on going to the city to do occupational therapy next year.

The first reason, the primary reason why I've chosen to have a gap is the cost for me to move to the city. Rough calculations has made it that I'll spend about \$9,000 a year in accommodation on residence, which is a lot for my family. I'm working this whole year to just help out with my parents and get some money behind us. It also gives them some time to sort of build up some money. We also have a fund like Patrick does, but since the recession, whatever's happening, it's halved pretty much, so that's made it quite hard. It's sort of the hidden costs that you get from moving from the country to the city that are going to make it extra hard. We know there's the accommodation, and then there's the books and the fees, but it's the hidden costs like car parking. I'm going to need a car to get back to home whenever I want to, the Internet, like necessities, just all the basic things. The accommodation that I've planned on going to, they provide breakfast and dinner but I'll have to get lunch, snacks, just things you don't really think about until you're actually in a situation.

This year also the gap is going to help me with life and work experience. I am doing a traineeship through the school. Working in the school alone has given me a lot of experience in dealing with kids, adults, different situations. It's also given me time to make sure the uni course that I've chosen is right for me.

I'm planning on doing work experience at the hospital some time soon to sort of figure out that that's what I want to do because moving my life so far away from home I want to make sure it's all right for me. It's also going to give me time to learn life skills, like how to do my own washing, cooking and consolidate my driving skills. Like that's a big thing, driving in the country to driving in the city. It's given me time to be semi-independent, like I'm working, I'm getting myself places and doing my own things, but my parents are helping me, so it's just making that transition between being dependent and independent a little bit easier. This is also giving me more time to represent leaving the Benalla country community. Obviously living in the city is going to be a lot different to the country. I have lived in Benalla all my life and I don't have family in Melbourne.

The people who have gone down to Melbourne that I went to school with last year, a lot of them seem to know either friends or family and it's made it that little bit easier for them just to have a bit of a connection. The main thing is I'm going to have to re-establish myself in a new community, I'm going to have to make new finds, find a job and going to uni. I have to go get a job and get used to a new area, which is a really hard thing to do, like just speaking to people there's lots of people having trouble at the moment just fitting in and getting used to the city way of life rather than country.

To take the year off was a really difficult choice. It made it a lot harder when I got into the accommodation that I applied for because I wasn't sure about a gap year until I was pretty much finished and then offers came out, so I had to decline my offer of accommodation.

Watching friends leave, it's definitely hard, but I have really had no choice. Like a lot of people in the country we really have to stay here and just earn our bit to help with uni costs, so thank you.

The CHAIR — Ann, were you going to add something now?

Ms FORSTER — Would you like to ask your questions first?

The CHAIR — We will come back to that and then come back to having a broader discussion.

Ms FORSTER — I guess my task today was to give you a bit of an idea, and I did give you a sheet, it's got the Benalla College logo on the top to give you an idea of the sorts of in-school programs and activities that we try to provide to the cohort every year, I guess, to try and solve some of these problems for them and to also broaden their outlook on all levels, the accommodation that's offered to them, the sorts of scholarships that are available to them, lots of universities offer visiting for the day, like we talked about, and we have to try and finance those as well.

Now our students all come to Benalla College, or the senior campus, with a managed individual pathway from year 10. In reality, that is more a tool for them to begin choosing their subjects for their VCE years and less about their actual career because in that two years or two and a half years they often change quite substantially. That is the start for them when they start investigating whether or not they will leave the area or whether they'll try and access further training and further education.

The sorts of assistance that we try to provide here are probably similar to a lot of other schools all over the State, metropolitan as well, but as I said before, the cost is always a factor, so we try and let them know early on when the open days for instance are going to be so they can plan, they can plan their jobs, they can plan their sport, their parents can decide whether or not they will visit, and we do a lot of work with the year 12s in term 1 and 2 to try and make sure their visits to the open days are meaningful and they're not just going to turn up and be part of the circus that often happens at an open day, so they go to the specific places and ask reasonable sensible questions.

This year we've included the cost of the age careers expo or the Herald Sun careers expo in the school fees and this is going to make it a lot easier for us to organise for the kids to all go to that.

We get lots of offers from career associations, different universities and tertiary institutions to come and speak to the students, and this is a really good forum for that. The army, for instance, always get huge numbers who are interested in that, particularly with the new gap year provision. We have kids interested in that. We have a session in the country called the tertiary information session that all our students attend and that prepares them for their application at the end of the year. We try and work up to these sorts of things so that they have a bit of information to build on rather than just going cold to this, you know, scary thing of moving to Melbourne or whatever. We are lucky in the country to have or at this school to have a really good contact with VTAC and they visit us and hold the parents' briefing so the parents can come and hear about what to expect and what the costs might be.

We often have a speaker from Centrelink who will come along and talk as well, and the TAFE and La Trobe and Melbourne often also come. Student accommodation is always a problem. It's a really hard concept for kids to come to terms with, that they have to actually apply, and not having seen where they might be going to live or what it might be like or how much it's going to cost or where it's away from or, you know, the fact that their bedroom is going to be quite different to the one that they have at home is really difficult and we do have some speakers who come and speak to groups of children who are interested, but it's really hard to get the students to come to these meetings because they sort of don't think about it. You know, they don't think about the fact that they're going to be leaving their bedroom with their own shampoo and deodorant and everything and go and set up a whole new life in a foreign place. So that is quite a challenge for us to get students to come and hear more details about accommodation. Really, as well as getting their position in uni, getting their position in accommodation is almost just as important to them.

We have several early entry programs at Benalla College where we're under-represented at different institutions and students are invited to apply for an early entry place, so we have good results with that. We work with La Trobe Uni and Charles Sturt University where the students are required to write an application and we have to recommend them one way or another, whether we think that they would be successful. If that happens they get a place before everyone else and they can relax on that level and then start thinking about other things.

Now, of course, if they have to defer, as we heard before there are a huge numbers of deferrals, that is not available to them. Their other concern is that lots of scholarships are not available to them if they're deferring. Of course they're welcome to apply again the next year, but we're trying to keep it all rolling along as the year goes along. Often they'll come up against the students saying 'Well, you know, we're deferring so we're not going to do that'. It's almost like it cuts out a lot of their options, they feel.

In a local community such as Benalla, we have terrific support from the local community. There are several scholarships which are presented at the graduation year, substantial amounts of money which always help students with their costs to go to Melbourne, and the local community also are very supportive in that they provide opportunities for kids to do work experience and work placement school-based apprenticeships which are based at the school, of course, and facilitated by us which also count in their results. So that's a plus for our students. You know, nearly everybody knows somebody in a business. You know, they go to the footy club they know somebody where they can get some help as far as work experience is concerned. Our career centre operates sort of like a bit of a drop-in centre.

We're very fortunate because lots of schools have a broom closet; we've got a beautiful room down there which has got a lot of room to spread information out and we get a lot of information. Some unis only send stuff online, but I find that the students really like to take books away to look through rather than looking online. They use online as well though.

So we have an appointment system where I see all the year 12s before the end of term 2, and then this year we've had such an interest in year 11 that I'm not going to get through the year 12s because year 11s are making appointments too and I sit with them and work through, as Jasmine said, what sort of opportunities and different courses that they're able to apply for. Sometimes I find that their pathway changes, and we have significant numbers of students who stay longer and do three VCEs so that they can apply for something that they didn't originally think that they were going to apply for.

I think that might be just about all that I need to say.

Mr HOWARD — Thank you, Ann. We might open up for questions now.

Mr DIXON — Ann or Sue, just in relation to the take-up rate post-deferral, with students who are deferring do you find most of them then take up a place or does it go into the never never?

Ms OAKLEY — We were actually talking about that. We don't have the data on that. We were saying anecdotally we know kids don't take up that place and certainly the report on rural deferral is sort of saying take-up's not bad. I think it mentions something like 600 out of 800 students that they looked at, but I still don't think that's very high. Really it's only sort of two-thirds take-up and I know anecdotally a lot of kids actually choose perhaps after working in the community for a year, they have a relationship with someone in the town or they've got support in the town or even Wangaratta or Shepparton they make a decision they'll stay locally after they've worked for a year. They get a taste of living more comfortably too and having more money.

We were just saying one way that we try to support that pathway is, you know, 'Don't forget what your aspirations were' because we do have such a drop-in centre for our careers room, we get a number of ex-students that come to visit us and we quite welcome those. There were a number of them at the beginning of this year and at the end of last year who say 'Now I'm ready to go to uni but I'm not sure, can you help me with my application?'. So that I think is a great resource that we have.

Ms FORSTER — Because they're familiar with us, they'll just pop in.

Mr HALL — First of all, congratulations for your presentation here. It was well done and most informative, so that was great.

Melanie, you spoke about the cost factor associated with your deferral. Would you qualify for the youth allowance? Did you explore that?

Ms LEVY — I have. We looked into being a dependant person, so I'd be still living off my parents and there's a threshold that your parents are earning and that amount was really low for work, not many people get it from here. It would have to be a one-person income and just really unfortunate. I've looked into becoming an independent, so getting payments from Centrelink, so that's what this is about, earning 18 and a half thousand so the Government will give me - I think it's \$300 every two weeks or so. The only thing with that is I need to get a second job on top of this one because it's a traineeship and I get the wages of a trainee, so that makes it a bit harder.

Mr HALL — We're finding a lot of young people, the prime reason for their deferral is to purely qualify for that Youth Allowance because otherwise the cost of attending university just doesn't work.

To either Jasmine, Pat or Melanie, what's the preferred destination from kids around Benalla? Is there a particular preference, given perhaps that La Trobe has a strong association with the college, is La Trobe or are you aware through some of your peers what their intents are in respect to universities?

Ms BILLINGSLEY — I've heard a lot of last years students, they applied for the Charles Sturt either at Albury or Wagga campus. Also I've heard a few going down to Melbourne University as well. I'm not sure how many.

Ms LEVY — They went everywhere, all around the city. People did go to Wagga. A lot of people seem to go to Melbourne University. I know a few who went to La Trobe, a few went to Deakin in Burwood so it's all around.

Mr MARPLE — There's no general consensus even within our own year as to the best place to go. It's 'Where I can get in, wherever is best and where I can get the best opportunities'.

Ms FORSTER — I think our policy, we don't encourage a particular uni, but we have strong connections with Melbourne uni and La Trobe because of the Shepparton and Albury-Wodonga campuses. There's quite a lot of students who start their nursing in Shepparton and lots of kids can go to Albury-Wodonga and still live at home and then transfer in their second or third year, but in the records that I keep, there isn't a strong lean towards any particular uni.

Mr HALL — Is there any emphasis on country campuses as opposed to city campuses? I ask that because I asked the question to two young students down in Bairnsdale. One wanted medicine and one wanted to do teaching. I said they could go to Churchill campus at Monash but they wanted to go to Melbourne and get away from home and experience a different life and culture. Would that be true of you guys as well?

Mr MARPLE — I know it's true for me. I do actually want to experience the city life. Not so much to get away from the country, but to experience something different so that you're not kind of stuck in one place in a sense, and I just believe that it would be fun.

Ms BILLINGSLEY — I felt it was more personal choice. A lot of them, some people wanted to get that experience, say like Pat, to go down to Melbourne and experience life, the city life, but also some of them preferred to stay up in the country because it's more like home, they're used to that.

The CHAIR — I didn't hear you say what you were hoping to do.

Ms BILLINGSLEY — Social work at RMIT or Monash University.

The CHAIR — Did you say which university?

Mr MARPLE — Melbourne I would like to go to because of their new breadth and depth program in which I would be able to take a straight science course but at the same time I'd be given the opportunity to expand to philosophy or literature or some other area of different study.

Mr KOTSIRAS — I think there are three parts to getting into higher education. The first one is the aspiration of students which could be flowed on from the parents; second one is to get the results that they need at school; and the third is whether they can find funds, money, to go to the course and whether there's a campus.

So the first question is what are the aspirations of the students and how much are they influenced by their parents and, if so, how can we increase the aspiration of the parents?

Ms BILLINGSLEY — Well, me personally, as I stated I come from a single-parent family. My mum has actually gone back to school to study community services certificate 4. She's been sort of my inspiration and help to me along the way. She probably influenced me a fair amount in my choices in career. I'm not sure about Pat.

Mr MARPLE — In terms of my parents, both have always encouraged me to do what I enjoy, saying that really you don't specifically have to be an academic or be good at sport, so long as you enjoy what you do, and if you go to the university excellent, and they set up the trust fund as I said, and I can't remember which particular organisation it's with, but they set that up when I was very, very young. That gave me the opportunity if I wanted to go to the university, then there would be some set of savings to help me with that. There has always been that kind of encouragement to if you want to go to uni, that's a great idea, get a higher education.

Mr KOTSIRAS — How about your friends? What about the other students? You two could be an exception.

Ms BILLINGSLEY — A fair amount of my friends their parents tried to encourage them to pursue their career, whatever career they choose. A lot of them like Patrick set up a trust fund to help them.

Mr MARPLE — The majority of students' parents I think do encourage their kids if they want to go to uni it's a great idea, go to uni. I don't think there's an enormous lack of parent support in that area. It more comes down to a sense of monetary terms of whether they're financially able enough to be able to supply or maintain that.

Mr KOTSIRAS — How many students were in Year 12 last year?

Ms OAKLEY — We had 81 or 79.

Mr KOTSIRAS — What percentage got into their first choice?

Ms OAKLEY — I didn't have a look at that. We didn't look at the percentage first choice, but I'll have it here, if you give me a minute, because I was going to add something to that about parent aspiration as well.

The CHAIR — Can I just check then have your parents had university education?

Ms BILLINGSLEY — No.

Mr MARPLE — My father's a wool grazier, so he did actually go to an agricultural college in Geelong. My mother, I don't think she ever went to university. She became a nurse and I can't remember quite how actually. It was more through experience.

The CHAIR — Practical, yes.

Mr MARPLE — Practical experience that she was able to do that, yes.

Ms FORSTER — The total number of year 12 students last year was 83. 82 per cent of students received an offer and first round offers was 46 students out of the 83. That's significant on one level, but when we have our results day when the kids all come in, I always encourage them to leave their original applications if their marks aren't quite what they should be, I still encourage them to leave that.

Mr KOTSIRAS — What are the barriers that you think are stopping students from getting into their first choice?

Ms FORSTER — Getting into their first choice, marks.

Mr KOTSIRAS — What's stopping them from getting the marks? You said the programs are excellent, so what are the areas stopping the students?

Ms FORSTER — There's a whole range of programs there, but we need to make the parents - these are fortunate kids - we need to be able to make the parents and the community more aware of what's on offer and it takes us a long time sometimes with some students to even get them to allow themselves to have hope.

Ms OAKLEY — The other comment I wanted to make is that last year we had a meeting with future year 12 parents, which we hadn't held before, the timing was in November, and we talked about their expectations as a parent in year 12. I was a parent of a year 12 student last year as well and have been in the past. One of the issues we did face is that parents feel as though they have no role in that year 12 year. That 'The kids are young adults now, and you know if they decide not to study, that's not really our problem. If they decide they want to do this course, it really isn't much to do with us, they're young adults, it's their choice', and actually giving parents licence to say 'You still have a significant role in this young adult's life', which is what I find is the most difficult, to still say 'Well yes, you can still give them some direction in terms of what their social life is like, you can still give them direction in terms of how they balance their life, that they're not just spending time studying because you feel that's really important because they're doing it for you, but still give them licence to play sport and you are pivotal in their success for the year. Don't believe it's time to back off because the kids turn 18 and they have a car and they're independent'.

One of the things I push is that there is actually - we do have highly aspiring parents but I do think we have to give them the licence to say yes, you still actually have a role for students, perhaps a bigger role than you've ever had since they've been in secondary education.

Ms FORSTER — We also have a lot of parents who have not had the opportunity of having further education, so it's all of a bit of a mystery to them. That can be good in that they encourage their children to do really well, but it can also leave the students holding all the information and that's not always the best thing. So encouraging parents to be more informed would be a very good thing for us to consider here.

Ms OAKLEY — Hearing the students talk about the support that they would miss if they move away from a home is an indicator to me that they still need so much support when you're in year 12.

Mr MARPLE — It can be quite overwhelming if you're receiving this information and you're the sole person who's making all the decisions. If parents know more, have more of that information and can help you with those choices, it's much less stressful in year 12 for a student.

Mr HALL — Does TAFE have a good campus here in Benalla?

Ms OAKLEY — We offer some programs here that are auspiced by TAFE. We have quite a good hospitality program, we have IT, engineering, VET engineering, VET construction and VET auto that we do have some quite close links with TAFE. They aren't huge programs that are offered here. In fact, probably one of the areas that they're developing now are some alternative programs for some of our early school leavers, which has been a great, I suppose, partnership that we're working at while kids are still at school and offering them some work at TAFE and some work here.

Mr HALL — Is there a separate TAFE campus?

Ms OAKLEY — Yes.

Mr HALL — In Wodonga?

Ms OAKLEY — Yes.

Mr HALL — How recognised are the pathways between TAFE and higher education?

Ms FORSTER — Not very well.

Mr HALL — Is that something we need to work on?

Ms FORSTER — Yes.

Mr HALL — So how many kids applied or went into vocational education through TAFE or private providers?

Ms FORSTER — At our school?

Mr HALL — Yes.

Ms FORSTER — We run a lot of vocational units here at Benalla College as part of the VCE. So some of those are TAFE, but there's lots of other private providers too. I don't know the figures.

Ms OAKLEY — I can find that out for you whilst you're having morning tea.

Mr HALL — I was just interested in kids going on to do a formal TAFE course, diploma or traineeship compared to those who made an application to do higher education.

Ms FORSTER — The VET courses are often included in those courses.

Ms OAKLEY — You're talking about post-secondary?

Mr HALL — Yeah, either apprenticeship, traineeship, diploma or advance diploma course. I know diploma and advanced diploma is regarded as a higher education course.

Ms OAKLEY — Traineeship and apprenticeship pathways are actually quite strong here and certainly our school-based apprenticeship, whoever designed that program knows what they're doing because that trend has allowed that transition and connection with school. We still want the kids here, but they're getting their pathway to work and that's a very, very successful program. In fact, one of the things we do when students exit school before the end of year 12, is interview them and ask 'How did you end up getting this apprenticeship?' and nine times out of ten it would be a pathway from a school-based apprenticeship.

Ms FORSTER — Benalla College is committed to that on a real level because theoretically no new work is taught on a Wednesday as that's the day when the students can feel free to pursue their area.

Mr HALL — Is that part of your role, Ann, as a work education coordinator? I noticed in your title 'career work education coordinator'.

Ms FORSTER — To manage that?

Mr HALL — Yes.

Ms FORSTER — Yes. I work with outside agencies like job agencies, job pathway, all those sorts of people. They visit the schools regularly and work with the students who are looking for school-based apprenticeships and then they submit a training plan to us which we sign and then it goes on to the students' records so that's recognised as part of their course. It's also a very useful tool for retention, so that's one of the things that we do to try and keep the students at school. There are students who come to school two days a week and do their apprenticeship three days a week.

We also last year started a hairdressing course which is improved retention of girls, so that's a good VET program which has really gone well here at Benalla College.

The CHAIR — Following up on the issue of deferral, Melanie you've actually said that you think that the deferral is going to be good for you in a range of ways. Would you have chosen to defer even if you weren't looking at the option of gaining independence in terms of Austudy?

Ms LEVY — Yeah, I don't think I would have deferred if it was in that situation. That's why it took me so long to decide. I didn't decide on whether I was going to defer until I actually got this job, so if I could have, I probably wouldn't have deferred just to keep that momentum going, just end up in the workforce just a little bit sooner.

Mr HALL — Patrick, for yourself it sounds like you're chomping at the bit, you won't be deferring?

Mr MARPLE — No. Actually, I thought the logic of deferring would be that it would be a good chance for me to develop independent skills of living alone or living with a couple of friends or students in a house or a residential area.

The CHAIR — You think you might defer still?

Mr MARPLE — Yeah, I'm still thinking of deferring. One thing of course that comes into consideration is scholarships and other -

The CHAIR — Whether there's disincentives.

Mr MARPLE — The issue with if you're wanting to defer and if you want to keep those scholarships and opportunities going which will further help going back to uni.

Ms LEVY — I don't want to defer at all. I believe that it's like statistics show there's more of a chance that I could fall into the trap of 'Oh well I'll just take another year off, it will be fine'. So I prefer just to get in there and get it over and done with as such.

The CHAIR — Do you know of any students who have deferred and what's the feedback, do they then go on after a year or do you know of a number who have dropped out?

Ms LEVY — I have lots of friends and cousins and people who have even deferred for two years and three years and then they've decided 'Yeah I'm ready to go'. Like my cousin has only decided to go to uni this year and she's two years older than I am, so yeah, a lot of people choose not to defer just because they're scared they're not going to go back, so it just depends.

The CHAIR — Your cousin started back this year?

Ms LEVY — Started this year.

The CHAIR — It's a bit early to get her experience on that.

Ms LEVY — I think she said she needed it. It was time for her to grow a bit and have some experiences.

Ms FORSTER — It's one of my questions when I interview the kids and it's a huge percentage of kids who are going to defer. It's mainly to get the independence allowance, but there will also be a group of students who go away and do volunteer stuff. That has to be planned for also, so that's quite costly, but usually the kids who have thought about that for a long time have planned for that and they do fund-raising and stuff like that.

Mr HALL — A question about accommodation. That was an issue which quite a few of you raised. Some provide quite good accommodation, some are quite partial, and given the cost of that is fairly expensive on parents - and we've all gone through that of having to pay for it - what about lower level accommodation like backpacker standard accommodation or hostel accommodation we used to have around when we went to uni?

Ms BILLINGSLEY — I looked into it. I went to open year last year and there was accommodation across the road from it, but it's sort of the accommodation that I looked at was similar to the costs of actually staying on campus. Yeah, that was a bit of a surprise.

Mr MARPLE — I think with accommodation particularly, where you're living is really integral to part of your identity and how successful you'll be and you're overall state of mind, and I think you want to find somewhere that you feel really, really comfortable in that you really like so that that can help you when you go onto your higher education, which can be quite stressful. It's nice to have somewhere you feel happy living in, studying in and relaxing and you feel safe in. I don't know specifically, but for some of the say cheaper accommodation, you may not get that there. You may feel unsafe or it just doesn't feel good for you kind of thing.

Ms OAKLEY — We were wondering if in country communities we do kids a disservice by pushing, they have such a good sense of communities these students. We talk about our school community 'You've been selected in the swimming team so please come along and help represent the school because you're part of a community'. We say 'Let's be involved in the fundraiser for the walk around the lake', 'Let's do this and that'. So we're building these great young adults and contributing to a community and they can, you can get feedback from that straightaway. Tell me if I'm wrong, but you do. People notice what you do, it's in the local newspaper.

Shift that to another environment where no-one is actually noticing you, you're not getting the feedback.

Mr MARPLE — Or recognition.

Ms OAKLEY — Or recognition or feeling of self-worth that has been nurtured in a community or also not the opportunities to be involved in the community, and that's what they try and mimic down at residence accommodations is like 'We're a big family now, say goodbye to mum and dad', which is what I did last weekend, 'Say goodbye to mum and dad and this is your new family'. They mimic a lot of the things that Patrick was talking about that he would experience because he does have family in Melbourne and he does have support in Melbourne.

Mr HALL — Part of my story is, and this is what I was leading to, I could have gone to university, also residence on campus, but that cost an arm and a leg. We went to a low cost hostel which was specifically for country kids and therefore you maintained that sense of community and you had support from all other people from similar backgrounds, but it was a cheaper living option, and my question was sort of along those lines.

You know, do you see that it's possible to expand the range of sort of living options which might provide for the needs of country kids?

Ms LEVY — There's also like living with our people who live in Melbourne. Boarding. That's also an option, but then again you've got to pay money for food and utilities. Sometimes it's easier just when you're moving so far away and starting a completely different world, it's just easier to have it all in one little box.

The CHAIR — We might wrap this up at this point in terms of the formal hearing from Benalla College. As you've mentioned before, we're having morning tea at 11.30 and we're certainly pleased to continue informal discussions with you and others. So people can drop in and chat.

Thank you very much for your contribution.

WITNESSES WITHDREW

CORRECTED VERSION

EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

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

Benalla–3 March 2009

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
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Witnesses

Ms A. Heywood, executive manager, social planning, Rural City of Wangaratta

The CHAIR — Good to have you here from the City of Wangaratta.

Ms HEYWOOD — Nice to meet you.

The CHAIR — We understand you've made a submission to the hearing already or the city has.

Ms HEYWOOD — Yes.

The CHAIR — So we're happy to follow-up on that and for you to expand upon that presentation.

Ms HEYWOOD — Okay. I'm the social planner at the Rural City of Wangaratta.

To introduce myself, I haven't got a background in education, but part of my role is we have an education advisory committee and I'm the secretary for that. That committee was very instrumental in the original submission. I guess two particular concerns were the disadvantage that they believed that rural and regional students have and also options to provide further education or higher education in places like Wangaratta. Wangaratta is quite a significant regional centre, but I guess the urban area's got about 18,000 residents and a lot of neighbouring councils feed in. It's got quite a strong secondary education centre and a campus of Go TAFE and also a very well established centre which also has a campus here which has been established there for many years. So it's quite an education centre, but it's not big enough to have a campus.

The residents of Wangaratta often in speaking to us and when we're planning say they would like their own campus there. As we said in our original submission, there were three regional campuses within about 80 kilometres of us and they are very useful in helping local people extend their skills. The subjects they teach are very tied into regional employment and those sort of issues, but there aren't the full range of courses that are available in metropolitan areas.

The distance from Wangaratta is good if you've got a car, if you don't have many commitments, and a lot of people do go there, they go there in connection with their work, further study, or they go there just for general personal development, but it's not accessible to everybody.

I guess our submission originally focussed on the barriers that we had that we saw for rural students, and one of the main ones was that they didn't have any opportunity but to move away from home to study in our area, with the exception of the very few who could get a car to Wodonga. The majority have no choice but to live away from home and that involves their parents in more expenses than they would have if they had the opportunity for the kids to live at home for a while, making a more gradual transition to higher education.

We felt it's quite easy to find some kids that have really struggled in moving to Melbourne. Financially, it's really only anecdotal evidence, we don't have exact numbers, but we'll hear of kids, there's an example that has been mentioned of a young student who wasn't eating properly because her family couldn't afford to supplement her allowance and also a lot of kids in quite low-standard housing, and they're often competing with urban kids for places in Melbourne, in either rental accommodation or in colleges. It's more difficult for country kids to find somewhere to live, I guess, and they haven't got that safety net of being able to live at home if things are tough. We found that a lot of even quite middle income families were struggling with the costs of keeping one or two students particularly in Melbourne.

The other issue we had was the transition that they make, and it's often very quick. You hear, of course, and you have to find somewhere to live, it might not be very suitable and often it's like a transition, I guess, for most kids throughout the world to move to the city, they really want to go but when they get there, they've lost their support networks and for some of them it's quite a difficult transition, and if they come home they're seen as a failure quite often. You know, it's like they want to succeed.

I think since we did that submission, we should emphasise the drought and continuing things has made a significant difference. Quite a lot of the more affluent rural families used to buy a flat in Melbourne for their kids over a few years, but now they're selling stock, they don't have that sort of income.

Accommodation in Melbourne is more difficult to find. Transport costs are making commuting to the regional campuses more costly. We found a lot of kids are actually not considering an option of doing home education any more and saying they don't want to do it. Not in our council, but in Alpine Shire we were told that there were no kids saying they wanted to do education from one of the smaller high schools there, who didn't want to continue, and it's hard to tell whether they actually don't want to do it or they know the family's struggling financially and they don't want to add to that problem.

Another issue has been the number of - particularly the women who were studying in regional campuses - have actually withdrawn. Even though that would have secured their income in the future, it's seen as a bit of a luxury, so that's seen as one of the first things to go.

About three or four years ago we developed an education strategy and our main focus - people said very strongly they wanted a regional campus in Wangaratta, but we realised that on doing the research it probably wasn't very likely given the size of the population and the fact that the regional campus is there. We also felt it was a right of passage that kids often wanted to move away, so we thought our focus should be more on attracting young people, other young people back or slightly older people who moved back because late 20s people do move back to the country or urban people move there. There is an inflow then, so we thought that's where we should focus more than perhaps immediately.

We also at the time identified a need for technical education. It was the time when technical education was being recognised as needing to be developed and we had had a good technical education system in the past and felt that that should be our niche, perhaps, with our campuses around us, and so we did have the first Technical Excellence Centre in the State built and it's a very large one still and it's been extremely successful, but we believe there needs to be pathways to higher education from that. I guess we were looking at that need to provide more transitional arrangements so that the kids didn't make such a fast transition to Melbourne, and also looking at that I think I've said before that sort of professional education ongoing, just look at how we might develop that without duplicating things.

Some of the priorities have been very clearly looking at other modules, and one of the things that has been successful that we have has been from our hospital which is North-East Health which is a regional hospital. It started off with a very small school for the interns there and that's developed and they've started keeping the interns there longer, and then some of the specialists in Wangaratta are saying there's a need - Wangaratta has apparently the largest group of specialists in the north-east of Victoria and Riverina, and so they're looking at developing a further Medical Centre of Excellence they're calling it but perhaps could be expanded to other health professionals.

Mr HOWARD — This isn't in conjunction with Melbourne University?

Ms HEYWOOD — Yes, it is in conjunction with the Melbourne University, and that's undergoing a feasibility study at the moment. We thought it was a bit of a pie in the sky thing at first, but it apparently does look as if there's a lot of opportunity to develop that on a much broader regional basis. In the past this is more at the technical level, a very successful course was started by Go TAFE that met a particular market, so we were looking at perhaps having a couple of specialist areas but also looking at using our existing facilities which are quite a lot to provide a smoother transition or opportunities for people to study further in our region, I guess.

We had quite a few things and opportunities we've done, including we built a joint academic community library. That's been developed and has the potential to expand.

Looking at some first-year university courses has been often said. Using the school laboratories, which are a high standard. They're building a new high school at the moment, so that could be used for some practical things. The centre is also looking at running some first year university courses if that could happen, and we're probably only in the initial stages of looking at that, but I guess because the population is low, we're looking at things where there are courses in common. There might only be a few people in a particular area, but sort of adding to that.

I guess another thing we've also at the council and some other places started gap year courses which are really aimed at professions that the council really needs to attract as being the main ones that we've utilised, such as town planning/engineering. We've talked about childcare as well, but the idea is that we can actually attract students in year 12 to do a gap year with us and some holiday work while they're at uni, but it kind of gets them into the course they want to do and the direction they want to take without the fear that they might just disappear at the end of year 12.

Yes, I guess that's it.

The CHAIR — We can follow with some questions.

Mr HALL — On that last point, how does council actually run that in terms of providing employment opportunities during the gap year?

Ms HEYWOOD — We have an interview process and seek applications, and anybody can apply from within any area, but they need to be planning to do that course and go into it. They'll have to apply for the course at the end of the year. There will be no employment other than in the school holidays sort of.

Mr HALL — Do they have to have had a deferred place?

Ms HEYWOOD — Yes, they have, yes, a deferred place.

Mr HALL — So if you were doing town planning or something, you would have to have a deferred place at university, a deferred position, to be eligible for that?

Ms HEYWOOD — Yes.

Mr HALL — How many students does the council take on at the moment?

Ms HEYWOOD — Usually three in the town planning and engineering area, but it's been very successful and I guess they do change their mind about their career if they didn't like it, but as well as doing specific work in their area, they do other things at the council so they find out other careers and other opportunities as well.

Mr DIXON — How many would apply for those three positions?

Ms HEYWOOD — Not as many as we'd like. Maybe there's been between five and ten for most of them. I think because it's a fairly new idea, but we're trying to promote it.

Mr HALL — Do any other councils do it that you're aware of or is it an initiative of Wangaratta?

Ms HEYWOOD — I think some to do, I don't know who, but I think there would be some, partly because there's a shortage of certain disciplines especially in the rural areas.

Mr HALL — How do you get around the employment arrangements? Do you take them on as trainees?

Ms HEYWOOD — Yes, they're trainees. There's some opportunities that way.

Mr HALL — Good idea.

Ms HEYWOOD — They have worked through the holidays. They don't have to do that, but while they're studying, a lot of them do come back and work on specific projects.

Mr HALL — Do you find any of them have done work experience with council before? It seems to me that they need to be channelled in that direction, so maybe they've taken up work experience?

Ms HEYWOOD — No, I don't think any of the ones we've had, have. We have got a program where we go to the high school and the Catholic college and talk about the opportunities Local Government have, but I don't think it's something that younger people think about. I don't think I would have thought about it in my youth, that I'd be working for a council. There's a lot of variety of work there.

Mr HALL — It seems to me that model might lend itself to private business in the city as well so that you might have the local accountants or the local legal people or something, you know, could be involved in that.

Ms HEYWOOD — Yes. I think it does allay that fear that if they don't continue that gap, it will become permanent and they'll disappear and do something else. I don't know that that's the case, but there's that perception that if you don't keep the kids studying, they'll disappear.

Mr DIXON — Do you find there's a need to push students to take up places in the regional universities or is it something that naturally happens, or do you have to make a conscious effort to do that?

Ms HEYWOOD — No. I think it's their choice very much. There's a huge peer pressure to move to Melbourne, huge, because it's where all the excitement is, but there's still a very solid group of kids who really don't want to go yet who like to live in the regional areas. They might ultimately go but they're not ready.

The CHAIR — Can I follow-up on the issue of possibly offering first year uni courses in the area? You've had discussions with some universities have you, or some tertiary institutions or where's the discussions so far first of all?

Ms HEYWOOD — I think the education providers have, not council specifically, but some of the Go TAFE and the centre are starting those discussions and I guess they're thinking of probably subjects that are common to a number of courses and yes, just to make that transition more gradual and as a way of making it more affordable.

The CHAIR — Are you aware of that model working anywhere else around Australia?

Ms HEYWOOD — No, not to my knowledge, but I don't know for sure.

The CHAIR — Or the model of universities or various tertiary institutions sharing infrastructure which is the other sort of model that comes through your submission?

Ms HEYWOOD — I'm not aware of it. It would be a great trial project to do, I think.

Mr KOTSIRAS — How many years have you lived in the region?

Ms HEYWOOD — In this region?

Mr KOTSIRAS — Yes.

Ms HEYWOOD — Maybe 40 years.

Mr KOTSIRAS — So what's your view on the aspiration of parents? Do they expect their children to go on to university or higher education, or do they want to them just find an apprenticeship and work or find part-time work?

Ms HEYWOOD — I think it's a bit of a moving feast. It wasn't aspiration quite a few years ago, it was a minority that went, and often kids that had gone away to private schools, but then it's become much more common that people see it as part of your education, a university education follows, but I think in the last few years there's probably been a swing away from everyone going to university and some technical education for some of the kids and there's been a focus again on that, but I think my own kids are in their 30s now and they were quite a minority that went to university in that time, but within a few years it was almost every one went.

Mr KOTSIRAS — So have you noticed a change in parents, people that you have grown-up with or lived with, is there a change of attitude towards their children going on to higher education? Do they want to see more of their children to go on?

Ms HEYWOOD — Yes, I think so. In terms of their opportunities in life, I think, and there were so many more kids now from, you know, quite similar rural areas that actually live overseas in Barcelona or London. They're much more attuned to the world and yet perhaps for many parents it's totally foreign, higher education is a totally foreign environment that they haven't been in, but they still have that aspiration for their kids. Yeah, if not that, a really good solid trade and build a career that way.

The CHAIR — Is there an issue of the skill base in the region that is impacted by not enough students going on to some areas of higher ed?

Ms HEYWOOD — There is a lack of skills, yes, and possibly it's because so many move to the city and then don't move back. There's been an issue actually attracting people back. I don't know whether that's a permanent thing. I have a sense that in the last couple of years there's been quite an influx of people moving back to regional areas and bringing skills, and Wangaratta was very much a textile town. You were either a farmer or a textile worker and a lot of people that left a few years ago probably still see a job in a factory is what you do in Wangaratta or you work in an engineering business related to farming, those sort of trades, and that's changed.

There's quite a lot of different opportunities and so more people are coming back and urban people are moving to the regions, but yes, there's definitely a skill shortage in quite a few areas. Also retaining people who have got skills, you need to be able to study off campus if you want to upgrade your education, and people do need to upgrade their education. If you can't do that, it's nearly impossible to do it without moving away.

Mr HALL — What about the Technical Excellence Centre, what do they actually do there and what further opportunities does it provide for people in Wangaratta?

Ms HEYWOOD — It actually takes from year 10 onwards, you can choose to be part of a technical stream and further technical education. The academics, that is still very strong, there's still a very academic stream, but most people will do some sort of trial technical subjects, and I think they've moved that down to year 9 as being a year where they started a community college where the kids do community work, volunteer projects in the community which has been very successful, and they try technical subjects and then they continue on in year 10 onwards with the technical subjects if they choose to. It's been quite amazing.

We had quite an issue with disengaged young people who weren't really happy in the academic streams. Our high school's got a very strong academic record, but moving into that community stuff has been very interesting in keeping year 9 kids sort of interested in what they're doing and involved, and also the technical subjects, a lot of kids have chosen them and a lot of kids do a combination.

Mr DIXON — So students can go to the local, they don't go to the tech centre all the time?

Ms HEYWOOD — Yeah, they go between them. You can combine courses. They're building the new centre. We've been using the tech school as the campus.

Mr HALL — So the kids that are going there, do they typically come out with a VCE, VET or VCAL?

Ms HEYWOOD — VET and VCAL subjects.

Mr HALL — Or an apprenticeship.

Ms HEYWOOD — Yes, but there are still good technical options that lead towards engineering. We try and say, you know, there are other pathways to get into higher education or future careers.

Mr HALL — They don't seem to be a lot different to the Australian technical colleges then.

Ms HEYWOOD — No.

Mr HALL — The same sort of concept?

Ms HEYWOOD — Yeah, I think it's a State concept.

Mr KOTSIRAS — What is one recommendation that you would like this committee to make if you had the final say? What would be your final recommendation?

Ms HEYWOOD — I guess that opportunity to trial some more flexible ways of that transition. First year university courses in other regional centres would definitely be one.

I heard you with the former group talk about the hostel sort of rural residential facilities because the kids are often competing with urban kids who want to move to the inner city for accommodation, and if there was a supportive environment that was aimed at rural kids, it seems to me it's often the urban kids that are competing on the same level yet they've got an option to be somewhere else.

Mr HALL — Mum and dad live at Brighton but they still want to go to the on campus residential.

Ms HEYWOOD — Yeah. I think it's ANU, I don't know that it's in Victoria, but they actually discriminate on the postcode to be closest to ANU. You get prior choice so that makes rural students even more disadvantaged in going there.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much, Anne.

Ms HEYWOOD — I'm really happy that this is happening, the inquiry.

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CORRECTED VERSION

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Benalla–3 March 2009

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Deputy Chair: Mr N. Kotsiras

Staff

Executive Officer: Ms K. Ellingford

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

Committee Administrative Officer: ms N. Tyler

Witnesses

Ms A. Trickey, executive officer, Careers Connection

The CHAIR — You're of course aware of the general issues that this inquiry is covering. We're certainly interested to learn a little bit more what Careers Connection is doing and your feedback can help us in our report.

Ms TRICKEY — Thank you very much. Thank you for the opportunity to be here today.

I'm currently the executive officer of the Careers Connection and that's an organisation which has been contracted to be a local community partnership under the Federal Government Career Advice Australia initiative, and I have brought a few little brochures along so if anyone's unclear about what that is I can provide that. It's a role to do with careers advice and transitions for young people. We're working with 13 to 19-year-old age groups.

I've worked in the careers education field for the last six years and I work with the careers teachers of Shepparton and the surrounding schools right across government, Catholic and independent sectors. In general I find that careers teachers are a committed and passionate group, very committed to their work. Most of them have got post-graduate qualifications in careers education or they're currently studying for them. There's a strong interest in the study scholarships that both the State and Federal Government offer, and careers teachers are generally pretty good at sharing information and helping each other with that information, but they struggle to have enough time to provide the services that are expected of them, and aside from a teaching load, they often have other responsibilities, committees and other things they're involved with.

So typically a small school might have a careers teacher with four periods a week, and a period is generally 50 minutes - not even an hour, not even four hours. A bigger school might have six periods a week for those. In that limited time they've got to meet with every year 10 student to organise their work experience and to help them select what they're going to do in year 11 and what their pathways are going to be, also meet with year 12 students to discuss their post-school applications. Many careers teachers tell me that year 11 students don't get much attention at all and they acknowledge that this is a problem but they simply don't have the resources to do much with that.

Some schools have stopped making work experience compulsory for year ten students because they can't fit this in, despite work experience being a very valuable careers education tool.

The students generally value the information and advice they get from their careers teachers but stories about careers teachers being hard to access are pretty common. A student might need to track down their careers teacher during recess and lunchtime but if she or he has yard duty, then that's an impossibility.

Meeting with the careers teacher after school for out of town students who have to catch buses is not an option and the careers teaching might have a meeting or a bus duty themselves.

Career teachers struggle with the volume of information they receive. For occupational health and safety reasons I didn't bring in what they actually get, but these boxes present a visual representation of the volume. Talking to careers teachers that's about the volume of what would arrive in hard copy in a week during the lead-up to the application process when the year 12s are putting in their application. So the universities in particular are sending through a lot of hard copy material: posters, brochures, leaflets, books DVDs, CDs. That's aside from what comes on their email, which is huge, huge.

I've been Secretary of the Careers Association and I know how much stuff I forward on to them in that secretarial role. So how are they supposed to keep their head around all of that, I don't know, but I'm really glad I only brought up empty boxes because I wouldn't be able to cart the material up the stairs.

At the moment what they're getting is about that much material in two days, that volume of mail. They've got to open and sort and action and get to other people and file and keep track so that when they get asked for something they've got a way of being on top of it. I don't know how they keep on top of that.

They also struggle to get to any professional development opportunities. It's part of my role to promote these opportunities. It's really hard to get the teachers to it because they've got to get someone else to teach their class and they've got such limited time to do those sorts of things. They have limited budgets. I try and organise professional development opportunities if I can on very limited cost, but anything further it's hard for them to be able to afford to go out of how much budget they've got at the school. So they have to prioritise, and I think that most of them would see that a thorough knowledge of the VTAC process and university application process is vital, that that's core to what they need to be able to do because, that they're the person that helps the kids through that process.

For the students themselves financial reasons for moving out of home are the main reasons they decide not going to university. I'm quoting that from On Track data which you have access to. There's also high levels of deferrals from country students as they seek to earn money during their gap year before they head off. The seeking to qualify for youth allowance, that's what that's all about. If they then go to university they've got to juggle their finances to make ends meet, comply with Centrelink requirements and juggle study, work and their personal needs of looking after themselves to manage day-to-day living.

So I'm wondering whether perhaps some don't go because they've heard how hard it is from the ones that have gone.

Compare this to a city student who stays at home and gets their cooking, cleaning and washing done for them and catch public transport to go to classes. It just means there's no equity of access for country students.

The current private rental market in Melbourne is very difficult for a country student to break into and especially when applications have to be made in person to get private rental, and you might need 30 or more applications to gain a place. Having an inside contact can help, but how many country kids know someone who works in a metro real estate agent's who can help them in that way.

University also expects students to attend in person for routine enrolment and application processes, and a recent example was a family who spent six hours travel, three hours down and three back, to spend 15 minutes lodging a deferral application at a university. They found out the day before that they were going to need to do that.

There are university courses available in rural areas, but we've seen how the universities change course delivery. The situation we've seen locally, only one year of the course will be available here or one year will be available in Melbourne or the university might stop providing the course at all. We've got examples where students attending the rural campus have felt they've been treated inferiorly to the metro students, and lectures provided through teleconferencing, there's been some issues with that where the technology doesn't work, and that's done so that those students don't miss out on that lecture and, of course, in rural areas we can't compete with arrangements made in the city. I'm not suggesting we should, but that's one reason why it may not be an option to go to a course in the country.

Country students might come from families where neither parents have gone to uni, so if these young people are choosing not to go to tertiary studies, then we're creating another generation that hasn't got the experience or the expectation of tertiary education.

For some young people the experience of moving out of home and away from home and all that's familiar to them is just too daunting. But for many young people the opportunity to move out of home and experience the wider world, they want to do that, but they can't because of financial reasons. Our young people from farms around here are very aware of the financial strain on their families due to the drought, with recent fall in milk prices, and what's happening is they're choosing not to go to university so as to not add to the financial burden. What they're doing is removing it as an option. It just goes off the list of things that they might even consider doing and they're doing that quite early. So they don't explore it, they don't talk about it, they don't discuss it with their careers teacher, they just say 'Oh no I don't want to go to uni'. The truth is they know it's not going to be an option and they stop thinking about it or they think it won't be, so they just take it off the list.

Rural areas are experiencing skills shortages, and employers are telling me that the best option for recruiting and retaining a young graduate, a university graduate, is to select someone who grew up in the country. I'm hearing this from lots of employers. They're far more likely to stay in a rural area than a city raised kid. This applies even when a rural candidate has come to a rural area and return to their area, just return back to the country.

There are exceptions. If we're not training our own rural young people, then our skills shortage problems in rural areas are just going to get worse and our major cities have kept growing and rural areas just keep declining. I think that scholarships covering the cost of higher education will help, but I think scholarships covering costs of relocating to cities and living there, that's what's going to remove the imbalance and the financial discrimination that many people face.

So thank you.

The CHAIR — Thanks. Questions?

Mr KOTSIRAS — As I asked previously, if there was one recommendation that you would like us to put forward, what would be the one?

Ms TRICKEY — That sort of scholarship that helps with living costs because we've got the HECS arrangement and that way you've got equity between wherever you're living, but it's the financial costs of living in the city is where we need help. There needs to be some sort of scholarship arrangement for that.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Could you tell me a bit about POEM?

Ms TRICKEY — That was a federally funded program and it's now turned into 'connections' and its focus now is very much with young people who are disengaged from education. So it will be the secondary age school group and they've withdrawn from education, so their big focus with that is working on getting them re-engaged into education but there might need to be a whole lot of other issues dealt with to do with their home situation. There could be behavioural issues, learning issues, those sorts of things. That's moving way back down the other end of what needs to be done to help young people go to uni.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Again parents, aspiration of parents, is it low or high in the area?

Ms TRICKEY — I see a real mix. I see some farming families where neither parent has gone to uni and they're quite keen for their child to go. I see young people where neither parent has gone, so they don't even think about it. So I don't see any one box that people fit into. I see a really wide spectrum of thoughts.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Is there anything that government could do to assist the parents with low aspirations to perhaps lift aspirations in the hope of getting their children through?

Ms TRICKEY — Yes, I think there is, and part of that falls into my role, and we're trying to do a lot of basic careers information to parents to break that down so that parents see those possibilities and opportunities, but the biggest barrier that comes up is cost, and something I've just found about is a couple of universities were doing parent-info sessions about the costs of going to uni to try and show parents how they might be able to afford to do it. I'm keen to get that started again.

Mr KOTSIRAS — It's stopped, has it?

Ms TRICKEY — It happened a few years ago, run by Deakin University, and the man who was doing it retired, so we're trying to get around the universities and see if we can get somebody else do it.

Mr KOTSIRAS — How did the parents find it at the time?

Ms TRICKEY — The feedback at the time, I haven't attended one but I've spoken to someone who did and is working with me to try and reinvigorate them. The feedback was very, very good. It's really a matter of getting the information.

The CHAIR — I ask you about skill based or careers support in schools. Are there any models that work better than others that you've seen?

Ms TRICKEY — Some of the schools are working quite well with a team sort of approach where they might have two or three teachers and they're all looking after different components of it. I've seen some schools go with a non-teacher in the role, someone who's come from industry or employment experience, or from the school administration umbrella. Where I've seen that happen, it has worked very, very well, but the thing that's made it work is the person in the role where they've put in someone who's been committed and passionate and has worked very, very hard to make it succeed. I know that the teachers who were in the role have mixed feelings about whether that's a good thing or not, but I see both systems have worked quite well. The more time that's available and the more opportunities there are for one-on-one interaction with young people the better. That's what makes the difference, and adult conversation one-on-one is completely different than a classroom of 20 year 10s where none of them will speak up and indicate their deepest darkest wishes in front of the rest of the group.

The CHAIR — So one of the programs that was developed to sort of assist schools with that was the Managed Individual Pathways program. What's been your observation of that or similar sort of programs that have tried to work with students on an individual basis?

Ms TRICKEY — The MIPS is working quite well, I believe. It's been a little bit hit and miss in the early days with the schools, but they're sharing a lot of ideas as to what works. Probably the weak link in MIPS is the year 11s because pretty much all that happens with year 11s is that they get their one MIPS hour interview for the year and that's a failing that the careers teachers acknowledge, that they do that because they have to and they'd like to do more but there isn't time, but it does mean that that one-on-one work is happening and there's a lot of value in that.

Some of the other programs that have been around and are one-on-one work can be really productive and lead to some good things there, and I used to do that sort of role, and to come into a class, and again year 10s, a heap of boys, and things are quite chaotic with trouble makers and you take one aside and sit down with them, and then they're a perfect gentleman and have a very intelligent conversation, and watching them going back into class it's like Jekyll and Hyde. So there's a lot of value in having that adult conversation with them away from the class where they stop being the class clown.

The CHAIR — That sort of leads to a mentoring program too. Do many of our schools take advantage of potential mentors?

Ms TRICKEY — There's a few mentoring programs around and they do take advantage of them. Some schools are utilizing their own advocacy programs and pick out students and they will have three or four students that teachers meet with individually. I know that's worked very well with some schools. We're just funded to deliver a mentoring program which will start later in the year.

The CHAIR — What will that entail?

Ms TRICKEY — That's federally funded. It's engaging mentors who are retired trades people, professionals and para-professionals, and primarily happen within the schools from years 9 to 12, but we're contracted for 90 students across just the Shepparton/Mooroopna region, so that's seven schools.

So there won't be huge numbers involved in any school, so we'll be talking to the schools to try and target students who will get the most out of it, but hopefully that will be a help. Certainly scope for more staff, but it's hard for the schools to fit it into their timetable.

Mr HALL — What sort of time allowances do career teachers need to do their job properly?

Ms TRICKEY — If I had a magic wand I could have what I wanted, I'd like to see them full-time in the role for a decent sized school of, say, 800 or more students full-time. In that situation it would be great if they could spend some class time with all year levels. So yeah I'd like them to be full-time. More time for one-on-one stuff, more time to go in and do careers education classes with the year levels and for them to be generally more available and accessible so that students can make an appointment to come and see them, parents can make an appointment to see them. So they've got the opportunity to deal with that vast quantity of information, go to information sessions and be well informed about what's out there, but currently yeah, there's four/six periods a week.

Mr HALL — Did you say that in some schools work experience has been dropped because of the excessive workloads?

Ms TRICKEY — Yes, in some schools it's optional and that troubles me.

Mr HALL — Tragic.

Ms TRICKEY — Yes, it is. In Victoria only a couple of vocational (VET) subjects is compulsory to do a work placement as part of that subject. For the rest of them it is highly recommended, but it really comes down to whoever's teaching and how important they think it is. Whereas I believe in New South Wales for those vocational subjects it's compulsory, mandatory something like two weeks for all subjects.

Mr HALL — On your response to Nicholas' question, I think you said priority should be given to scholarships that cover the costs of relocation, living away from home. Whose responsibility do you think it should be to provide such scholarship? Should it be government, universities, community generally? I mean, I agree entirely with that.

Ms TRICKEY — I guess it could be addressed in lots of ways. If it was done by government, then it could be equal for everyone. If it's done by industry or communities, then it will only be in certain areas. So I'm not sure what would be the best way to go. I would love to see it available equally to all rural students, but maybe in the short-term it needs to be local communities what they can do, local industry looking at what they can do. SPC-Ardmona has been providing a scholarship for the last couple of years to help students from the area go to university. I'm not sure what the best way to go is.

Mr HALL — Nor am I. I can see some arguments, and as you say some universities would provide that and some industry provides that.

Ms TRICKEY — And there are some community funds around that will give grants as well.

The CHAIR — Thank you Anne.

Ms TRICKEY — Terrific, thank you very much for the time today. I'll leave these here.

WITNESS WITHDREW

CORRECTED VERSION

EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

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

Benalla–3 March 2009

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Witnesses

Dr L. Crase, director, Albury-Wodonga campus, and
Ms E. Lavender, executive director, Shepparton campus, and
Mr A. Harvey, acting executive director, Bendigo campus, La Trobe University

The CHAIR — Welcome to this regional hearing in Benalla. We've, of course, heard from Benalla College and Wangaratta Council and now Career Connections, but also the opportunity to talk with universities is pretty important to us so we're particularly pleased to have you along today. So I don't know who is speaking first.

Dr CRASE — We didn't work that out either. So you'd be familiar I'm sure that La Trobe has a significant regional operation that constitutes about 25 per cent of our enrolments all up. The largest share resides in Andrew's campus, Bendigo, and then the next size down is our campus, probably about a third to a half of what Andrew's campus is, and two other smaller campuses Mildura, and Elizabeth who is the director of the Shepparton campus.

I guess if we do it in order of size that would be easiest. So perhaps if Andrew goes first.

The CHAIR — Not in terms of time of presentation.

Dr HARVEY — What we were going to do is give you a brief outline of the university's impending regional strategy and where we're positioned at the moment across the regions, and then talk specifically about the three campuses that we represent.

So Lin's mentioned about our essential size. We're around about 23/25 per cent of the university student load. We are the largest regional presence in Victoria. We're trying to grow and the regional strategy, which we will have more details about that, is to grow student load quite substantially over the next four years, and that will be a major thrust. That will be the major thrust, to increase our student load. Also to increase research and international student numbers and also students from equity groups from the lower equity groups. So that will be the broad thrust of our regional strategy.

We're aware that participation rates in regional Victoria are substantially lower than Melbourne and 18 to 20-year-olds are half as likely to go to university in regional Victoria compared to Melbourne. We know that and we know from the government's point of view if we are to grow our student load we have to address that issue and get students aspiring to go to university from the initial years of schools.

We of course have been very focussed on year 12 students historically and they're the closest link to us of the school leavers, but we're going to focus increasingly on the lower levels now in terms of building education aspirations, so that's part of what the university will be doing under this strategy as well.

There are a number of ways that we will be trying to boost our student load and address the participation rates in the regions. Some of them are fairly easier than others. Some are about addressing entry barriers. We have options to provide regional bonuses to student who are studying in regional areas, we have options to articulate students through TAFE pathways, we have options to attract promising students at school into the university perhaps in different ways from the usually VTAC mechanisms at the moment. There are a lot of things we can do in terms of the entry barriers to increase the number of our students in each campuses and we'll look at those.

I guess the broader question is how do we increase the aspirations of all students in the regions, which is a deeper question, and that does involve getting the university presence into the schools right into primary schools, ideally getting the La Trobe name and profile out there, getting students aware that there is a university out there.

Obviously a large number of our students, all our regional campuses are the first in their family to go to university, we know that, so they're not familiar necessarily with the whole system. Those are the deeper issues that we're looking at and trying to get the university presence into those schools, not just at the senior levels but further down.

We've also said that we will try to specifically target equity groups and we'll have projects to do that. These are some of the areas where we would like government support, of course, and partnerships to do some of those projects.

We've had some relations with, for instance, organisations like the Smith Family in terms of trying to boost our equity numbers on regional campuses and we will continue to do that, but there are opportunities there for governments at State and Commonwealth levels to work with us.

We intend, as I said, to increase our professional and international students. We have a cohort of internationals at Bendigo and a fairly small presence elsewhere, but we intend to increase that and we intend to increase our cross-campus research as well as interdisciplinary research so there will be a focus on interdisciplinary in organisations and also a focus on research across our campuses whether that be across regional campus or including the metropolitan campuses.

That's probably the broad thrust of our regional strategy and I'm happy to talk more about that after questions, but perhaps I now hand over to Lin and Liz to talk about their campuses.

Dr CRASE — I think it would be helpful for people to understand that notwithstanding La Trobe has an ambitious strategy, that we're hopefully going to launch once we get some feedback from Bradley, but it's important for people to understand that each of the campuses is quite different and each of the communities is very different.

So notwithstanding that we have a broad strategy that aims squarely at addressing some of the issues across what might be regarded as a regional Victoria, it's important to understand that each of our campuses differs quite significantly in character and the types of people we attract and the type of services we deliver are quite different as well.

Also the challenge of actually attracting students differs significantly between campuses. To be candid, I would have thought that in my part of the world around Albury-Wodonga, which historically has strong employment growth, one of our practices has been trying to get students to realise that tertiary education is actually a better delivery than having a job in the hand right now, and it's kind of a shame from our point of view that we need a recession in order to make students realise the value of tertiary education.

I suspect the challenge in Liz's part of the world is different in terms of what the socio-economic background of people in her region is compared to Albury-Wodonga, and again if you look at the socio-economic profile of Mildura being quite different, the challenges for recruitment in those campuses differs quite significantly. That's an important message I'd like to convey that those challenges, whilst you can have sort of a broad statewide approach, it's important to also appreciate that there are individual nuances that are going to appeal to different kids in different ways.

So I'll perhaps leave it to you guys to ask specific questions later, but in general terms, I mean the big issue for us at Albury-Wodonga has been deferral. We have the On Track data shows deferral rates in our part are higher than most other parts of the regions.

Tonight I'm attending a Catholic college where they have now realised that their deferral rate last year was about 70 per cent. We know from our data on our campus that we lose about 70 per cent of those who defer, they don't come back to us to take up a place. So from our point of view that's kind of the low-hanging fruit. That may not necessarily be case on other campuses.

The CHAIR — Do we need to look at that in more detail?

Dr CRASE — We were discussing this over coffee earlier. Often it's based on anecdotal stuff. We actually followed up when we realised our deferral rate was so high and that our return rate was so low. We followed it up with phone calls. It was difficult to get in touch with a large number of people at that point, but the two themes that came through were a large number of people deciding that they had employment, that they weren't disposed to relinquish the security that was tendered at that point in time, so they were not going back to study.

The second cohort were people who had basically lost interest in study. Now that doesn't mean that we're going to lose those people forever, but it's an issue as to whether we as a society or an economy can afford for those people to be in lower-skilled, lower-paying occupations for periods of time that they choose to do so.

I'd just like to park that for a moment but just to emphasise that each of the campuses are quite different in character and the challenges are quite different.

Ms LAVENDAR — Just to go to the particularities of the Shepparton campus, obviously we're much smaller, but I think in Shepparton we probably have a lower school increase rate than either Bendigo or Albury-Wodonga. I think there are issues around aspiration that Andrew talked about, in fact I'm sure there is. We have already about 60 per cent of our students come from the low SES group. It was down a bit last year, but I think that was accounted for by having more education students who came from outside the region. Most of our students are from Shepparton and come to us because they can't go anywhere else for one reason or another. Most of our students are mature age, and as you know we have a particular socio-economic profile with the refugees and indigenous students.

We haven't done well with indigenous students. We're struggling with students with a refugee background.

So what I think in the three years that I've been there is it's an issue of aspiration around in the Shepparton region and those students who have come from the better off families have always gone to Melbourne University and we're getting the students who aren't familiar with tertiary education. I think we could do much better around the students who are getting from 50 to 70 who haven't even considered university, and as Andrew said we've got a project working with the Smith Family at the moment to try and work in those transition years of even grade 5 through to grade 8 and we also have introduced a gradual increase in education which focuses on that age group as well. I think.

The CHAIR — While we've got you, could you give us a background of the course offers at Shepparton and the mode of delivery? Are you using IT?

Ms LAVENDAR — Yes. We have Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Nursing, Bachelor of Accountancy, Business and a Graduate Diploma in Education. The Graduate Diploma in Education is in its second year now, this particular one, and that's largely done online. We have three intensives through the year, they meet and they also have a lot of online work to do. That has been so successful that the numbers of applications have sort of trebled this year.

The CHAIR — So your students are coming further afield then?

Ms LAVENDAR — Yes, coming from all over to do that.

Dr CRASE — Bearing in mind this is a post-graduate program.

The CHAIR — Yes.

Ms LAVENDAR — But other than that, the mode of delivery is mostly by face-to-face, depending on what faculty it's in. Some for example are in the faculty of health sciences, most of the lectures throughout the whole university, you know, the campuses are delivered by video conference, and then there's local tutorials and workshops and so on, and we've got a big presence on what we call the learning management system, so all the students notes and often recordings of the lectures and so on are actually there and with a bit of luck we can access them with technology, which is not as good as it might be.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Have you closed any course over the last five years?

Ms LAVENDAR — At Shepparton?

Mr KOTSIRAS — Yes.

Ms LAVENDAR — I don't believe so.

Dr HARVEY — Not that I'm aware of. The main one was the tourism hospitality.

Dr CRASE — Yeah, we closed the Bachelor of Business (Hospitality Management) last year, so we're teaching that out now. That's the nature of the marketplace.

The CHAIR — I guess one of the issues is we keep hearing that for universities offering in the regions, it's more stressful on the finances of the institutions and centrally the university body keeps looking at those figures, and so we're interested in sort of teasing out those issues of the financial challenges associated with offering into the regions.

Dr CRASE — I'm sure you appreciate that the way most universities are structured is that power and responsibility resides in faculties. They don't reside on campuses. So ostensibly with all these camps, decisions about courses, decisions about course delivery, decisions about viability are primarily handled at the faculty level, so obviously we end up with a matrix type of management structure where we as representatives of a community or representatives of a campus do the best we can to try and influence those decisions, but ultimately the financial consequences of good or bad decisions are borne within faculties.

So, for example, the decision to close the Bachelor of Business (Hospitality Management) was a decision taken by the faculty responsible for that program, and looking at their potential enrolments for that year they felt that it wasn't worth pursuing any longer. They noted that the interest in hospitality generally had been declining and they took a financial decision that it wasn't worth pursuing.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Student enrolments at Shepparton and Bendigo, over the last five years has there been an increase in student enrolments or has it remained the same?

Ms LAVENDAR — We only have a fixed number of places, but in 2008 we were 105 per cent enrolled. I think we have gone a little bit backwards this year, I think, but we're okay, and I think that as the university becomes accustomed to being a multi-campused university, which it is doing under this vice-chancellor, I think that for example our RBA was under threat for a while, but we've been looking at the way that that's delivered and there's a lot of improvements taking place and I think that, you know, if you've got the offering, you get a few more students, but it's a quite dicey.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Bendigo?

Dr HARVEY — We've stayed constant over the last five years. Probably slight increases, and we have produced some high profile course like dentistry, which is very high profile, but also courses like pharmacy, in the last three or four years.

Part of the challenge of Bendigo which might be a little different from some of our other campuses is not only to raise the education aspirations for students but to also become university of choice for the high achieving, for the real high achieving students. We need to emphasise and advertise that we do have dentistry, pharmacy and civil engineering, visual arts. We have some courses at Bendigo that are not provided at Bundoora. We have 16 per cent of our cohort comes from Melbourne on the Bendigo campus, so we do have some high profile courses, we do have students coming from Melbourne and we are trying to create a profile as being university of choice and not simply our university. We lose just about 50 per cent market share in Bendigo, but we lose nearly 70 per cent to RMIT and about the same to Melbourne.

Monash and Melbourne do some of the clinical health work, but although we're the main university out there we're still in the competitive marketplace.

Ms LAVENDAR — It's also worth mentioning that the health science, the Pro Vice-Chancellor regional is aiming to double the number of science students across all our campuses over the next few years, and there's substantial money to come to pay for at least staffing. We're hoping to get some buildings out of the next round, so there may be the possibility of increased numbers in health sciences in all our campuses, and also every single health science student, except for dentistry, does the same first year, so there will be a possibility, for example, if a student wanted to do physio from next year, they could do their first year at Shepparton and then move, so there would be a little more access.

Mr KOTSIRAS — In light of that, do you go into the schools and talk to the students about what they offer?

Ms LAVENDAR — All the time.

Dr HARVEY — There's a few different ways. We have a future student officer whose job is student recruitment. They're in the schools all the time. They go to the schools to recruit students. We have academics who go out to the schools as well. We have student teachers in the education faculties most times in the schools, but also other academics.

The third way that we're going to increase our influence in the schools is with student ambassadors which we're developing now which is a program for our university students who will be trained up and accompany our staff and go to the schools, in many cases old school as well, and connecting the students. So we're trying to become involved with the schools at those three levels. That's purely school visits. Obviously there are more substantial projects going on.

Mr HALL — I have just a couple of questions. In the terms of reference the requirement of this committee is to report to Victorian Parliament by June 30 this year, and I noticed Andrew that you said your regional strategy will be announced soon. I suppose that it would be very handy for you to have a look at your regional strategy and give consideration to it as part of the common points of interest that your university and this committee would have. Do you have any sort of timing?

Dr HARVEY — If you're able to lean on Minister Gillard, that would be help to us. We are waiting for the official response, but it will be out shortly afterwards. As I say, it is an ambitious strategy and I guess the message we'd like to convey is that we are committed to regional Victoria and we're planning to increase our presence there.

The CHAIR — While you're touching on this issue, your response to the Bradley Review, do you want to make some comment about some of those issues of equity and the regional presence that was presented in the review?

Dr HARVEY — There has been an official response to the review, but my first response would be to say that that would be worth the committee reading for the university-wide response to Bradley. Obviously the review identified a number of issues in terms of equity and the need to list equity. We know that nationwide 25 per cent of people are low SES groups, cohorts, but only 15 per cent in the lowest cohorts. That has particular implications for regional campuses where our low SES is higher than the national average, much higher than university average.

Now we don't get much specific funding for equity at the moment through the higher education system and we don't get much of a regional loading either for providing campuses and for providing regional operations. So one of the points that I think was made in our submission to Bradley was the need for some targeted funding towards the issues of provision in regional areas.

The CHAIR — Which Bradley basically supported that view in the report.

Ms LAVENDAR — Yes.

Dr CRASE — I think the interesting thing with Bradley, of course, we've already explained that we already have a strategy which is in draft format which sets ambitious targets for increasing recruitment in regional areas, but we add to that the fact that Bradley is also foreshadowing much greater participation in universities generally. I mean I think your panel should start to appreciate that these are non-trivial hurdles for us to get over and that we are going to require whatever form of support that happens to be floating around because we already realise that it's difficult to make year 12 students interested in tertiary education in regional areas and that notwithstanding the fact that we could always do more, it's not like we haven't been doing anything either to try and address those things.

The CHAIR — I guess what I was just trying to get at is are there recommendations made in the Bradley Review that you don't agree with or you think is contrary to maybe your regional strategy?

Dr CRASE — One, of course, that sits particularly with my camp is this concept of you'd be aware that Bradley has suggested that maybe there's more work to be done about the investigation of an inland university of Australia. Our view across the university is that this is kind of a recipe for education apartheid and one that we would not support. Notwithstanding the management challenges that will attend something like that, there are also significant theoretical and moral reasons why we would not want to pursue that.

Mr HALL — So when you're talking about within your strategy, about targeting equity groups and needing government support for that, is that the sort of things that we're referring to in this most recent conversation here about actually targeting funded places in regional campuses and the like?

Dr HARVEY — Bradley flagged the idea that there would be a specific pool of money tagged for equity purposes, and there's a very small pool at the moment, but we're talking about a much larger percentage of the cake, if you like, being divided according to both, so both the number of students that you enrol in equity groups and your improvement in those areas. Obviously if there was dedicated funding towards improving equity, yes that would help us if there was Commonwealth funding towards that.

I think there's also potential for State Government support of equity measures in various ways, and that might be through specific projects, as I say something with the Smith family or an organisation like that, or it might also be a targeted campaign in somewhere like regional Victoria where it's a particular problem. If we come back to that point that 18 to 20-year-olds according to popular research are likely to be in half Victoria rural Melbourne, I would have thought that's a matter of serious concern for the State Government.

Mr HALL — That's why there's committees looking into this inquiry.

Deferrals, is that a big administrative problem for universities?

Dr CRASE — Administratively it's not complex and some universities have dealt with that by simply making students pay a fee when they defer. So some of our competitors ask the student to pay \$100 to cover the cost of administering that process.

Our problem is if those deferrals don't translate into enrolments the following year, keeping track of those people, keeping them engaged with the university becomes problematic. So that's why we have a proposal that we're developing at the moment which is around actually facilitating a gap year program for students so that instead of just abandoning them and hoping that they come back rather actually enrolling them in a gap year program in that university which retains that contact with the university, it will still enable them to have their employment. We propose that it will still enable them to travel, so we build in a travel component because aspirationally that's what students seem to want to do in that gap year.

The ambition is to build that program, and we have spoken to regional Victoria about how they want us to do that. I find it perplexing that Victoria would have traineeships which they pay students to leave the regional area and go and study in Melbourne and then come back and they'll pay money to do that, but there seems to be nothing to students who choose to study in the regional area.

Mr HALL — To the issue you spoke about Elizabeth, and your students, many of them come from the near Shepparton area. If there was an extensive living away from home scholarship arrangement right across Victoria, so we're speaking ideals there, how would that impact on regional university campuses? Would it actually take students away from your campuses or bring students to your campuses?

Ms LAVENDAR — At the moment we don't have any accommodation in Shepparton which is an issue. We're only just about to get our own university accommodation as well. Our data shows that students who are in Shepparton are in Shepparton for family reasons, as I say a lot of them are mature age and as a lot of them are refugee students they're not allowed to go away anyway.

It's interesting that, in fact, the Shepparton cohort is, I haven't done the exact figure, but just eyeballing them last week is about 90 per cent women. So whether that's becoming an issue or not that the women are aspiring to universities in regionals but the boys aren't, I don't know, and certainly the women are less likely to be going away.

Mr HALL — Do you have any comment on that Lin or Andrew?

Dr CRASE — I think the idea of providing for support for students in terms of their accommodation is critical in terms of their success, regardless of whether that means they're leaving or staying. I convene the academic progress committee which is for kids that are basically struggling, and the vast majority of those students are struggling because they can't balance between work and study. They find themselves in a situation where they have to do a little bit of work, the boss puts them under pressure and say 'You need to do these extra hours', they can't say 'no' or they cannot afford the basic necessities.

I think there's some baseline funding that's required which should be available to all students to support so they could all study. Whether it impacts on our enrolments, I suspect some would leave but just as many as a result of that support will come.

So I think it's an empirical question which I'm not qualified to answer but I would have thought there's merit in the proposal and the overall impact on us is likely to be an empirical one. I think we would gain as many as we lose in my campus.

Ms LAVENDAR — The other issue that Lin didn't raise in regard to deferrals, and it probably isn't so much an issue at your campus, but apparently it is at mine, students take a year off to make enough money so they can get youth allowance, and even once that get youth allowance they're not allowed to earn very much before it cuts out anyway.

Dr CRASE — Notwithstanding there's a whole heap of inequities built into that itself.

Ms LAVENDAR — Exactly.

Mr DIXON — Just looking at the different campuses and the courses you offer, how much weight is put on to what might be a local need, an employment need or skills shortage when you do choose what courses you run at your campus?

Ms LAVENDAR — I speak for myself, it's a faculty issue and I have to say I don't think we really address local need because it's a faculty issue, and there's a great need for civil engineering in Shepparton. We couldn't run it and you wouldn't get the students in Shepparton.

Dr HARVEY — On that issue in Bendigo, we do run several civil engineering courses, but it is difficult every year despite the fact that we have a large number of scholarships in industry because they're all crying out for civil engineers, but we have a problem that really is a flow-on problem which is that students in school levels are not doing the science and they're not doing the maths. Now we have prerequisites for courses in those areas and we could remove them, but if students do not have the science and maths background, then they struggle to do those.

The other thing is regional needs are quite difficult to identify sometimes and sometimes you can receive employer feedback, evaluations or you can receive evidence from various sources that suggest that there might be regional need, but we have to justify establishing a new course for three or four years with a cohort of at least 30 or 40 students every other year, and it's not an easy thing to do.

Dr CRASE — I found it interesting in helping in the design of the regional strategy. I went to try and assemble the data around what people kept saying are local employment needs. It seems to me there is no central repository of reliable data on this, that it resides importantly with different bits and pieces that happen within State jurisdictions and federal jurisdictions. Coming up with just a reliable set that said 'This is what is required now and this is what is likely to be required in the future', would assist us in lobbying faculties to say that there is demand for a particular product.

You know, try to mount a law program on the basis of three lawyers complaining that they can't get someone to do their conveyance work is hardly a great argument.

Ms LAVENDAR — We put a specialist Graduate Diploma in Education and I think we got seven students, so it didn't work.

The CHAIR — You've said your Graduate Diploma in Education is online; what other courses do you offer online?

Dr HARVEY — One thing I could have mentioned that was part of the strategy will also be renewed focus on this and on blended learning. Probably less purely online, only on blended learning which to say the majority of the program might be done through online learning, but you will have a block that will come in for a long weekend or something like that.

We're looking at increasing our flexibility of delivery for that reason because we know also on regional campuses we have higher percentages of mature-aged students for instance than a metropolitan campus, and for a lot of those students blended is the most attracted to that kind. So we're looking at increasing it.

We need to do more and at the moment we don't have a wide variety of programs which are running that way.

Dr CRASE — It's a double-edged sword here that on the one hand some of this provides a solution from the universities' perspective in terms of delivering to different locations. On the other hand in terms of recruitment, I suspect that there are many year 12 students who would see that as a watered-down version and less attractive but not just to them but also their parents. So there's kind of a balancing act between these two.

I noticed on our own campus nearly all teaching is face-to-face. I think we have one or two programs which rely much more on video conferencing and yet there is quite a strong perception in our market that much of what we do is actually video conference, which is quite a long way from the truth. I'm not saying that those technologies aren't proper and couldn't be used, but to be candid, as an institution we haven't really collected the robust data that we need to assess what's the overall impact of those things.

Ms LAVENDAR — Certainly undergraduates, they're less likely to drop out and more likely to be successful if they are known by staff, and I think that's one of the things that all campuses do offer is a much closer relationship with staff. So you do need face-to-face.

Dr HARVEY — Yes, and that's been the evidence internationally as well, that school leavers in particular need that community and want to be on campus having face-to-face contact.

The CHAIR — Are your campuses all owned by La Trobe or do you have any shared use facilities with TAFE providers, other universities, or are there any of those models that you've looked at?

Ms LAVENDAR — We rent classrooms from TAFE at the moment, but our new building is going up and we will be sharing some services, for example books and coffee shop will be shared. We could still do much better in terms of an integrated model with TAFE, but that's very tricky.

Dr CRASE — Our campus is a shared campus, so we share the library facility.

The CHAIR — With?

Dr CRASE — With Wodonga TAFE. Wodonga TAFE provide some staff but we basically own the building. We share the student association resources between the two facilities, we share some accommodation, we have some limited student accommodation, some of which are occupied by TAFE and some university students.

We have been working pretty hard the last two years to make the relationship between our programs more overt so we now have quite clear heads of agreements, we have quite clear articulation arrangements and we're developing nested programs.

So, for example, our logistics program, the students actually do the logistics with TAFE and that then gives them ostensibly a minor within our business program. So it's a nested product in that respect.

Mr HALL — Are there many of your students who are taking the TAFE pathways into higher education?

Ms LAVENDAR — About 10 per cent with us.

Dr HARVEY — We have the data of that. It's about 12 per cent. I think it's actually higher in the other regional campuses.

Mr HALL — Are you happy with that number?

Dr HARVEY — We've all done a lot of work in the last few years with TAFE on articulation of pathways. I think we can do more in terms of some broader workforce planning, and the ideas of nested products that Lin was talking about as well. I think that's definitely for the future.

We own the campus at Bendigo and it's a self-contained campus, although we have a couple of buildings down town as well, but we work closely with the TAFE, but clearly that has to be a priority for us and it will be, but we've made a lot of progress, I think even in the last few years.

Dr CRASE — Yeah, that's the reality. I mean the institutional view is certainly that it's an important area. My personal view is I don't think that's of great weight, that's not the saver in terms of taking where we're at in terms of getting kids interested in higher study. I don't think the TAFE route is going to be the saver per se. It's really at the margin. It's the 1/2/3 per cent that we're not getting that we get through that particular pathway. To be candid, it's more of a Benalla TAFE because the TAFE certainly wants to indicate that this is the way that students can progress.

Mr HALL — Do you think such pathways are much more important, having that pathway more important to country kids than city kids?

Ms LAVENDAR — I suspect not, but I don't know.

Mr HALL — We need to look up those figures.

Dr HARVEY — The other interesting thing with TAFE is whether the government takes any of the suggestions in Bradley for the Commonwealth to take over the sector essentially. It could well change.

Dr CRASE — It's hard to give a universal response to that. I would have thought the pathway particularly important with health sciences, so even the new model that we now have on the other side of the boarder with Riverina TAFE where we have students who are in year 11, I think, who are basically already on a pathway to university, I can't remember what it's called. There's a clear pathway for them to move from year 11 and 12 into TAFE and into ultimately a nursing qualification.

Ms LAVENDAR — That's excellent for the students who do that, but it's very different doing a course at TAFE and first year university, very, very different. So we're delighted to provide a pathway for those students to go to TAFE first, but in fact if students want a university experience, they need to go to one really. It's very different.

WITNESSES WITHDREW

CORRECTED VERSION

EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

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

Benalla–3 March 2009

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Prof R. Chambers, deputy vice-chancellor, academic, and
Mr C. Sharp, director, planning and audit, Charles Sturt University

The CHAIR — Thank you for coming along. It's certainly been very useful to come out to the regions and up until now we haven't heard from Charles Sturt, so it's good to get your perspective of the issue of university opportunities in the regions, and so we're interested in learning a bit more about what you do and what you hope to do and what you're finding in terms of those involvement issues.

Prof CHAMBERS — Thank you very much for this opportunity. I'll say a few words and then we're happy to take questions.

Charles Sturt essentially is a university that is wholly based inland New South Wales. We have five campuses: Albury-Wodonga, Bathurst, Dubbo, Orange and Wagga Wagga. So we're very much a regional university. We're not a sort of metropolitan university with a regional bit. We're a wholly regional university. We're also Australia's largest distance education provider.

We have nearly 20 per cent of the distance education market. So CSU has about 34,000 students of whom 12,000, around 12,000 study internally on our campuses. 17,000 study by distance education. About 5,000 are international students.

We have a clear focus in what we want to do and that revolves around three things that we want to be good at. One is education for the professions, the second is applied research that's relevant to our regions and so on, and the third is distance learning.

We have, I think, a broad course profile and there are points I want to make in discussion that a lot of success in meeting regional needs but also in encouraging participation, lies in the courses you offer.

Our course profile is very much focussed on the professions, very strong in the area of health. We offer every health area except for medicine, but we include dentistry, physiotherapy, pharmacy and the whole range of nursing and allied health courses. Education, veterinary science, agricultural, animal science, wine science, environmental science, whole raft of courses relevant to our inland vocation.

Then there's a range of other professional courses, mainly in the human services area, psychology, social work, policing is one of our very strong areas. Nearly 4,000 of our students are police. We're the largest provider of police education in Australia. Business and IT courses as well. So it gives you some sense of our spread.

In Victoria we've just over 3,600 students of whom two-thirds are enrolled by distance education. The main centre on campus for Victoria students is Albury. Almost half the students that come from Victoria, are from Wodonga itself and then the Goulburn Murray kind of regions. The enrolments from Victoria are predominantly in those health areas I've mentioned, nursing, allied health, physiotherapy, OT, occupational therapy, speech therapy and podiatry and enrolments in pharmacy in Wagga and medical imaging in Wagga as well. We get quite a few Victorian students come down for that. Teacher education, early childhood and accounting, are also popular. Agricultural education goes back over 100 years where we are. The teachers colleges and so forth were all established in the late 40s or just after the Second World War. The university existed since 1989 and we've been quite successful in enhancing participation rates and in meeting workforce needs, so certainly across areas we regard as our footprint, including northern Victoria, for health professionals, social workers, teachers and so forth, particularly in the major cities in those areas.

I think this is relevant to your inquiry, the participation rates for recent school leavers in the major regional centres are now comparable to metropolitan leavers. Now where you've got more challenges, both in meeting workforce needs and in participation rates are in the areas we'd class as rural remote, and in our terms if you drew a line from Dubbo down to Albury and go west of that, they're the areas, that would be true in Victoria as well, they're the areas where there are more challenges. Certainly over 20 years we would say in towns like Albury-Wodonga and so forth, the presence of the university has managed to get participation rates up to national averages and across them.

I think it's important to look at the impacts of the universities on their towns and then on the broader regions. I'd say from our planning point of view we see our challenge is trying to improve participation in those more rural and remote areas rather than the major regional centres. So we would say university presence is very important.

In our footprint areas, we're getting around 70 per cent of students who go onto university come to CSU. Having said that, I think the idea of university presence is not - you'd have to say that's not enough in itself and that's one of the main points I'd want to make.

The most important point for attracting students, and by the way I'll talk about distance education later, but at the moment I'm talking about people who are coming on to campus to study, so we're mainly talking about recent school leavers. I can't stress too highly that the most important point is not just the university presence itself but what programs you actually offer.

Now people aren't stupid. They want to come and study something worthwhile and I think the secret of our success in attracting and retaining students in the region, and increasing participation has been to invest in that broad course profile I spoke about with the high end professional courses. So it's not enough to put up your shingle and offer something; you've got to have something that people really want to do, basically. I know that sounds like the bleeding obvious, but I think that's a mistake that's often made. People think the most important thing is what is cheap and easy to offer in a region, so that there can be a university presence. As I said people aren't stupid and what affects their behaviour is whether you're offering the courses that they want to do.

Secondly, I think you've got to look at the needs of school leavers and so, you've got to look at the campus experience. So again that group of people want to come to a proper campus, they want to have a proper university experience and that means all the kinds of support mechanisms as well as the ability to interact with other people and so forth.

The CHAIR — So what sort of specifics would you undertake at Charles Sturt to try and support first-year students who are living away from home, for example?

Prof CHAMBERS — We think that the most important thing is accommodation, and our aim is to be able to provide accommodation on campus to virtually everyone that comes into first year. That's obviously except for the students who live in town. We are now the largest provider of on-campus accommodation in any university in Australia. We made a decision that for students coming in from Griffith or northern Victoria or other regions, they should be able to get accommodation.

Mr HALL — What percentage of your students would live on campus?

Prof CHAMBERS — Of internal students, probably about 35 per cent.

Mr SHARP — The interesting thing there is from the AUSSE survey of student experience, if you look at that survey the happier, the most satisfied group of students in terms of their engagement with their learning are students who study on campus, but within that the students who actually live and study on campus are by far the most engaged with their studies and their learning.

Prof CHAMBERS — When we're building a business case for this we looked at success rates and there's clearly a relationship for students who are not living at home, there's clearly a relationship between success and living on campus. The students who are scraping around in town looking for rental accommodation, their success rate is less.

With the accommodation you've got to have some kind of student life and the full range of supports, places to eat, football clubs, that kind of thing, that sort of collegial life as well as normal student support service, health, learning skills that is the key to it.

Mr SHARP — So in effect the students are after a genuine university experience, - if you look at trying to do something in a smaller remote centre, really unless you can offer a real university experience, our experience has been that you tend not to be successful in attracting the students. That's what it comes down to.

Prof CHAMBERS — The other point I would make about this is that you've really got to be able to offer students the opportunity to do whole courses. We've tried various models where you can come here and do the first year and then you have to go somewhere else to do the future years. These are not effective and do not encourage participation.

Now in terms of looking particularly at attracting students from the towns and cities where the university doesn't have a campus, and obviously it's beyond possibility to get out to have a campus in every town, one of the interesting questions is, if they've got to leave town to go to university, why would they stop at CSU; why wouldn't they all go to Melbourne, Sydney or Canberra? That seems logical and we've looked at that, but in fact we think that we certainly pick up more than our fair share of those who leave and there are several reasons for that.

One I think is the living costs still remain better in CSU's regional towns as well as the kind of accommodation packages we offer. There's also I think a cultural factor. Many of the students coming from small towns are of the first generation going to university. Their parents haven't gone to any university. They seem to adapt better or find the culture more congenial.

As I said, there are access issues. It's just easier to get home on the weekend and so forth. To take an example from New South Wales, for people who have grown up in Griffith, why wouldn't they continue past Wagga? They decide not to because it is more congenial, more accessible and less expensive.

Mr SHARP — Just taking up Ross's point, if you analyse the type of applicant for on campus positions in New South Wales, you find that they're basically two types. One is the high calibre student who is following a discipline. So if their discipline is physiotherapy, they'll apply for Sydney, Charles Sturt, Melbourne, that sort of thing. They will be mobile and they'll follow their discipline.

The other sort of student is someone who I suspect was probably from a lower socio-economic background but you find they choose a campus. So for us, and I'm sorry to use New South Wales names, but they would choose Wagga campus, and if you look at their selection, they'll be interested in business or, generally in a particular area, but they will choose multiple courses from the one campus. They were going to go to Wagga anyway, no matter what. As long as Wagga had a course which vaguely fitted their aspirations, then they'd go there.

I'd be very surprised if it's very different in Victoria. You'll have these high calibre, highly mobile students that will move anywhere in the state and interstate to pursue their interests, and then you'll have another group that will go to a particular area that suits them, it's not such a challenge to go to Wodonga, for example, as opposed to heading to Melbourne.

Prof CHAMBERS — The other point if I can harp back on it, again it's course profile. We essentially recruit students in the courses where there's a reasonable match with workforce need. We built our profile in those areas where there's a very high need, like health, education, veterinary science. There are huge shortages at the moment in the country for those. I think that's critical to people. People make realistic choices if they're going to go to university, they're usually on some sort of vocational pathway.

Mr SHARP — Somebody spoke to me the other day and there's two words we use in CSU, almost like a revelation to them, when we talk about offering or setting up a course: we talk about 'need' and 'demand', and in effect you need to have both of those aspects. They're the two main drivers to be determined to establish whether a course should be run.

Prof CHAMBERS — You're juggling need and demand all the time. Sometimes you have to resist the temptation of student demand. I think there's something like 30 universities in Australia that offer law degrees. We've probably got enough lawyers, yet there is still demand for law and you have to say 'No, this is basically a silly idea'.

There are, on the other hand, some other areas where there's clearly workforce need but where it is extremely difficult to attract students. Engineering is one of those in the country. Civil engineers the shires are crying out for. It's extremely difficult to get student demand for that area.

If I can make a couple of other points. One of the most important things in making the course profile work for most of the professional courses you want to offer, is to have the opportunity for clinical placements, so to sustain that course profile you have to solve the problems of where to place students for the practical element. That's true for teaching, all the allied health and nursing areas, true for veterinary sciences. That can be quite difficult in the regional areas. Often when you're first going into these areas, the reason you're doing it is there are not enough professionals in the area and if that's the case, there's not enough to supervise the students in placements.

Solving those problems is critical. There's a couple of aspects to that. We're actually building our own clinics for some of these areas. You create the environment in which students can do the practical. So in Albury, for instance, we operate a podiatry clinic. Podiatry is one of the hardest areas to fill in the health area, but with the rise of diabetes in the population and an ageing population, it's actually one of the most needed areas. Diabetes leads to feet problems. In order to support the podiatry program, we've created that clinic. That now sees 5,500 patients a year from northern Victoria/New South Wales.

Dentists are oversupplied in the metropolitan areas yet the numbers of dentists in places like Albury or Wagga is very, very low. So the university has introduced a dentistry course and created five dental clinics, one in each of our towns, and the target of that is about 30,000 patient visits a year.

Mr HALL — Is there any resistance to those private clinics by the private sector?

Prof CHAMBERS — You have to work very closely with the private practices, but on the whole, for instance in dentistry, nothing but support from the Australian Dental Association and the local dentists because you wait six months to see a dentist in Wagga or you have to go to Canberra or further afield. They've been very realistic about that and our services are targeted at the kind of public patients not the people who have got health insurance. So no, we've had nothing but support there.

Veterinary science was quite interesting. We introduced veterinary science to address a shortage of people who were working with farm animals, because in rural areas there's huge shortage of veterinary scientists for production animals. There's not a shortage of vets for companion animals, but in order to have a veterinarian course, you have to run a clinic for small animals. So if we created a university clinic for dogs and cats, we're probably putting someone out of business, so what we did was build the clinic and invited local practices to tender to occupy, so that our small animal clinic that's part of the veterinary program is actually run by one of the local practices who sold up their premises and worked in ours. You have to work closely with the local people.

Mr SHARP — As I understand it, one veterinary surgeon in Wagga had the contract for spaying dogs, in effect, with the pound, and that duty was passed over to us as they were actually more interested in the ongoing sort of inoculations, care of the dogs, et cetera. So they were happy to pass over that aspect of surgery for our students to do as long as they still maintained that connection with the animal in its later life and the income stream that came with it.

So there are ways around it. It's not always cutthroat competition.

Prof CHAMBERS — Another important factor in operating regional universities is to make sure that they get a fair share of the practical placements. There's often competition with city-based universities who want to be able to place their students in regional areas, give them a rural experience this is true for example for physio or nursing. I'd like to say, though, that we found the Victorian DHS very, very good to work with and I think we'd be one of the major suppliers to regional Victoria of allied and nursing health professionals, and we've had very good relationships in terms of the planning with the department. Very impressive. They've been trying to very actively manage the relationships between the universities to sort out the issues and we've been very impressed with that.

The CHAIR — You haven't mentioned much about the online course.

Prof CHAMBERS — I'll come to that. We're the largest provider of distance education in Australia. It's basically now an online operation. We have a huge online system, but we think online has to be supplemented by all sorts of other leading approaches. We would never, even though we're the largest provider, we would never actually go out and say this kind of education works for recent school leavers. So the DE market is basically mature-aged people. These days it's especially people upgrading their qualifications.

So TAFE pathways are very important here. Industry learning of one sort or another. 23 per cent of our intake each year at the university are people entering on the basis of a TAFE qualification. So we have very strong links with TAFE and TAFE pathways. Distance education, I think, is really important but it's important for mature-aged people. I think in terms of your inquiry and participation in higher education, you mustn't just concentrate on school leavers. If you're wanting to increase the supply of professional people in regional areas and the participation in higher education, then I think the strength of the Australian higher education system - it's not you didn't do well at school and that sets your course for life, but there's a second chance, a way back into the system, and distance education plays a really important role there.

If I can just give an illustration, it's also extremely important for meeting workforce needs in regional areas. Now we have, for instance, a partnership with the Moira health area in Victoria. What we do there, is they found it very hard to get enough registered nurses. Now in a regional area, how do you improve the recruitment of degree-qualified registered nurse? The best answer is to look at enrolled nurses and see which ones are ready to upgrade because they are already living there. It's not a case of having to recruit someone in.

One of the ways distance education is important in workforce needs is targeting people ready to upgrade their qualifications. Particularly with social workers, that's another example that has been hard to fill in a number of smaller regional communities, but often in those communities you will find people with TAFE qualifications in community work and they're the people that will upgrade.

We've had our third intake of 20 TAFE qualified workers in social work in Deniliquin. That's where DE is really critical. It's targeting people who are ready to upgrade who are living in these communities, because you then solve all the problems of persuading people to come in and you build a cohort of professional people within those communities. So distance education, I think, has a very important role to play but it's really focussed on mature-aged, 25 plus.

Another way we've been working outside our main campus to improve participation is working in various collaborative arrangements with TAFE. So in a number of towns, I just mentioned Deniliquin, Griffith, a couple of other places, we work jointly with TAFE on the TAFE campuses to create pathways. Now again we don't find those particularly suitable as a solution for recent school leavers. They on the whole want to go to a university campus if they want to study at university and they want to have that university experience, but where the TAFE collaboration works well is in two regards.

Firstly, TAFE is very, very good at, I think, managing people who have really perhaps not had a very good experience at school, educationally disadvantaged, indigenous people for instance. TAFE has very, very good

programs for getting people up to speed and often some people in those situations don't find it easy to leave their communities, and so we've tried to work with TAFE to provide pathway programs for those groups of people. So, for instance, in Griffith you've got issues with indigenous people who want to stay in the community. Also with some of the ethnic groups in Griffith, they're not really happy to see the daughters leave. So you can provide a program there in collaboration with the TAFE. It's a matter of analysing the need of the particular groups there to achieve enhanced participation.

Mr SHARP — I've seen a number of studies done, for example mid-sized rural towns, where there is a pool of unmet demand identified, for example, business or something like that or nursing, and the initial study finds this pool and says you can run a viable program here. Invariably what you're finding is the first year's enrolment's 25, the next is 12, and the pool, because they're so small, the pool of unmet demand dries up very quickly. Really, it's not viable to try and go there and do something on a sustainable basis. You have to look at other types of relationships like at TAFE, and whilst it mightn't be the ideal scenario, it is a way that you can at least have some success there.

Prof CHAMBERS — Two last points I want to make. One is just to refer to science. Now one of the issues, I think, all Australian universities are facing is that there are a small number of people coming out of school who are really committed to science-based careers. I think that's a huge issue for Australia and it has something to do with the way maths and science is taught, something to do with the way careers are presented. We see that as one of the real challenges in terms of going forward in higher education, and I think that's an area where universities have to work very closely with schools, but it's also an area we have to set signals.

One strategy CSU has adopted to help us improve participation in science courses is create a range of science scholarships. So at CSU at the moment any student who gets above a certain mark, and I'm afraid I don't know the Victorian equivalent, in New South Wales it's 80, so it's in the top of 20/25 per cent of students which enrol in a science-based course gets a scholarship in the university of \$4,000 a year for up to four years. We've tried to target our scholarship money to try and turn around the decline in science enrolments. That has started to have some effect. In addition we do a lot of work with schools to keep promoting science. It's a big challenge for our communities to create enough graduates in science-based courses.

The last point I want to make, is a global point. We feel very strongly at CSU that the thing that's most harmful to regional communities and regional education is what I call a kind of deficit mentality, where provisions of services to regional communities are seen as able to be second rate because it's just the regions and we have to do the best for them, but we won't be able to do exactly the best we can as in the cities. I don't see any reason why we should think like that with universities, for instance.

If you look internationally, particularly in places like the United States, some of the best universities are in very small towns. It's an Australian mindset that to be a good university you have to be in a metropolitan community. If you look in the United States where there are some of the major universities, they're very small towns. The town exists partly because of the university. My son, for instance, is at a university in Montana, a very small state. The population of Bozeman where he is, without the university, is 30,000. The university has 20,000 students. Imagine what that does for the economy, and it's a first-class university.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Has that got to do a lot with what they offer at those campuses?

Prof CHAMBERS — Yes, it does, but it also has to do with policy. In the United States, the state universities or the university of X state, the so-called land grant universities set up by each state Government, were deliberately set up in the towns. They've got the full range of programs. They just made the decision. There's no tablet of stone that says to be a big university or a major university you have to be in a metropolitan area. I think people need to be more conscious of that.

England, which is a smaller place, if you look at Cambridge, very small market town with a very strong university. I think we've got to get past thinking that the best the high quality must be in the metropolitan areas

and the country gets what we can afford to give them. That's true in health, education, services. It's not the right answer and it doesn't have to be like that. Universities, I think, are particularly good examples because of the impact they have on the economy. You know in Wagga, 12 per cent of the employment is attributable to the university.

Mr SHARP — In Bathurst it's 13 per cent.

Mr HALL — I suppose most of your students come through centralised application, like a VTAC, or the equivalent in other States?

Prof CHAMBERS — We use VTAC and UAC for our campus enrolments. For distance education we have direct entry. We've always stayed away from centralised systems.

Mr HALL — Are you able to offer a loading?

Prof CHAMBERS — Yes, regional. We add five points on for regional students.

Mr SHARP — Not only do we accept students through VTAC, but Victorian based students enter through UAC to get into Wagga. For example, there's over 250-odd Victorian origin students at Wagga campus who would have come in through the New South Wales universities.

Prof CHAMBERS — That would be almost certainly pharmacy, medical imaging or veterinary science.

Mr SHARP — Which shows again, if you have the right courses, youngsters will travel. You've just got to have the right courses and the right quality, you can make them move.

WITNESSES WITHDREW

CORRECTED VERSION

EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

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

Benalla-3 March 2009

Members

Mr M. Dixon

Mr N. Elasmir

Mr P. Hall

Dr A. Harkness

Mr S. Herbert

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Chair: Mr G. Howard

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Witnesses

Mr P. Guthrie, and

Ms T. Crumpen, Academy of Sport, Health and Education

The CHAIR — Welcome to our Parliamentary hearing. We hope you've been able to take breath and so we're interested in hear a bit more about the Academy of Sport, Health and Education, what you do and what are the opportunities for your clients to get involved in higher education and so on.

Mr GUTHRIE — My name's Philip Guthrie, and I'm the manager. I originally started as the coordinator when ASHE commenced back in 2004, coordination of curriculum really, and the role's evolved a bit, so become a bit more involved. Justin Mohamed, the Director of ASHE, can't be here today. His son was hurt in a bike accident, so Tui Crumpen is here, who is the manager of University of Melbourne's Goulburn Valley's office. She has been in the role 12 months, I guess, a little under.

I've been the coordinator and manager for the last four years. So I've got most of the history of ASHE that I can give you and go from there.

By way of history, ASHE or the Academy, I guess was the brainchild of a fellow by the name of Paul Briggings. He's quite a prominent Aboriginal leader. You don't go far without hearing of Paul. He has built a lot of partnerships with a lot of different organisations to invest in the club and in the Aboriginal community of Shepparton particularly.

One of those relationships was with the University of Melbourne which Paul was looking for at the university, which has a real interest, like a lot of universities do, in indigenous issues, promoting indigenous participation and that sort of thing. I think the university also has an interest in - it's known as knowledge transfer. I think the idea is that the university has this whole body of knowledge that it would love to share and how does it make that accessible to Aboriginal communities, for example, and then the other, the transfer is that the Aboriginal community also has a wealth of knowledge that the university would like to access. So it's an idea of a transfer not the university come in and going back, this is what we know, trying to get a beneficial exchange going.

As those discussions evolved, I think Paul had - I guess there is an issue with retention in school for Aboriginal kids in Shepparton. I don't have the exact data with me here today, but I guess that would all be documented somewhere. I think Paul had his idea that perhaps if sport and health in particular could be used as an alternative to help kids perhaps re-engage but sustaining the engagements with education, and that's where the concept came from, and university, through ongoing negotiations with Paul, decided to invest in ASHE, and this strange sort of set-up with the assistance of university funding.

All ASHE students are enrolled in TAFE at one of four certificate level courses, certificate 2. They're all sport and recreation programs, certificate 2 in sport, 3 in sport, 3 in community recreation or 4 in community recreation. That's where we've got to over five years.

Where ASHE has evolved is as a real holistic training program which is well resourced to address the range of different issues that confront the students, and from my experience needs all the resources it has to provide. I guess a realistic change, if that's what's needed, or affirmation if that's what needed for the young people to progress. Whether that be to education or in most instances a lot of our students don't have great academic aspirations, it's more about employment, it's more about 'How do we get ourselves employable or give ourselves an opportunity to work?'.

We enrol from 16 up. So obviously once the post-compulsory age has been reached, we can enrol students. We have a very good relationship with the local schools where we at all points, students are encouraged to stick at the school system. There's no sense of 'ASHE is the best place for you', but what ASHE has become, I suppose, is an alternative, and I like to think a very viable alternative for students who have lost the passion for school and are looking for another option.

Mr HALL — Do you select students or anyone who comes along are assessed and taken in?

Mr GUTHRIE — We have an open enrolment at this stage. We're five years in now where the enrolment has become more thorough now. ASHE has a fairly heavy physical activity component in it. I guess when I talk about 'holistic', we've identified, I guess, five areas of a student's development that we think are just crucial to their employability, and one of those is health and well-being. That is reflected in a fairly heavy physical component activity to ASHE which is used to assess various aspects of the student's development, whether it be communication, relationship, health, but there's a range because we want to get them fit and healthy. Also openness, to be able to speak openly like this. That's another area of the students' development. There's a cultural aspect, sense of culture, just an understanding of the awareness of the local Aboriginal culture. These are the things we like to see, participative is the other things.

Since ASHE started we've battled a bit. When I say that, the shame factor's very large and Tui might speak about that. There's a high degree of shame factor. In terms of activity they may withdraw for the fear of failure or being humiliated or whatever.

At the end the student is highly participative. They might not be geniuses but academically independent in the real world. So that's probably the fifth one. That just means a reading standard and a numeracy standard that we think is viable, that will get them by in the real world. If they meet that mark we don't bugger them more around that.

Mr HALL — How many do you have enrolled?

Mr GUTHRIE — Because it's post-compulsory, a lot will come in and have a go and say 'Maybe that's not for me'. I guess at first we tried to be everything to everyone, but now we've sort of decided that that's not really the way to go. We need to clearly define what we're about and we will either agree or disagree with students. Right now we've got I reckon so far this year we would have 45 people who have come in and had a go so far this year, of which we would hope say come the start of term 2, we work to the school terms, basically the same, but 25 or 30 would already be committed for the year, but it's hard to say - like to think - this week we've probably had 25 yesterday coming in and about the same today that participate.

There's a million reasons why the kids sometimes struggle to get in, and it's not just kids. We have a range of ages. All the training and enrolment, the training is set up for 16 to 25-year-olds. That's the bracket that we're roughly trying to engage and work with, but that hasn't stopped a range of adults with children. We have a range of ages participating, but our focus is on Aboriginal kids 16 to 25. So our curriculum's been developed and evolved. That's the area that we're primarily working on.

I don't know if that gives you a snapshot of ASHE of where it's at now. It's been a fascinating journey, really. It's sort of almost metamorphoses by the day, it changes in terms of the students that enrol.

One decision was made this year not to chase anyone. When we initially started, there were kids at home we needed to try and get them in to make our program viable to have students participate. We stepped right away from that this year to the point where we didn't chase anyone. We opened up enrolments. We ran a TV commercial that just alerts the community that enrolments are open because history told us that the best results came when students came to and make a decision for them to come rather than us knocking on the door 'Please come in and help us' and we're making promise that we probably couldn't keep anyway.

Mr DIXON — Have you done any tracking of students who have completed certificates?

Mr GUTHRIE — Yes, it is challenging, but not to the extent that we would like to, but even that itself changes rapidly. Like what might have been true six months ago in terms of employment, who was in JONS, who was training, it would be completely different now. Our experience of that's the nature of the participants. That can really change very quickly. I suppose it is a challenging age group. They're at a stage of their life where TLIR making choices, they're looking at their options and ongoing engagement at ASHE and history in employment has been difficult, but we've had some outstanding examples of students that have gone on to stick at jobs, but it

wouldn't have been tabulated to any great extent, and maybe that's something we've identified the university could help us with because honestly the time involved in that, we don't have the resources.

The CHAIR — But you have links with employer groups?

Mr GUTHRIE — Yes. That's the biggest thing. We've got Aqua Moves, the local gym facility, Shepparton Sports Day and council in general are probably the key relationships, as well as the local primary schools.

I suppose we've tried for example at Garish, this is where we're trying to make ASHE fit into the education landscape of Shepparton, where does it fit. Say for example Gowrie Street, we supply a staff member and student each day to go and run a lunchtime activity at Garish Street High School. Garish Street had a history with kids mucking up, getting on 'SOSs', and the reaction to that was we had kids that needed practical experience, to take some of their training into the real world. I guess we had a need and they had a need so we found a happy mix there. Sometimes we had three going a day. They get great experience and also a sense of self-worth out of that.

We go into schools to run activity programs and we run a major primary schools event called 'ASHE-letics', which you may not have heard of, but it's a program for Aboriginal primary school kids to come to a day of games and cultural activities. It's a major community event now which is only going to get bigger and bigger, and our students, as part of their training plan, deliver that event. So that's how that works.

I don't know if Tui's got a perspective.

I guess my role has been to develop this curriculum and develop our relationships with employers and all that sort of stuff. We've had two examples, so far, of a student coming to ASHE and re-engaging in secondary school, which we're delighted with. They were two close friends. They both came to ASHE at the same time, they both went back to school at the same time and both engagements were highly successful. One has gone on to a scholarship to Ballarat College. I don't know exactly, it's a boarding college, to complete year 12 this year. The other young fellow he's still in Shepparton but he actually won a major award at the Australia Day awards in Shepparton. I think he was the Youth of the Year for Shepparton. It blew us away. He came to us as a real ratbag and he just sort of managed somehow.

One thing ASHE does for the young kids who have attitude, because there are older people there who culturally they need to respect, it makes them quickly pull their heads in. My experience with these kids is that they grow up very quick. They're supposed to do things pretty full-on. Socially, they're very mature. In some ways very mature but in terms of what they've seen and been a part of and privy to, they're quite experienced. In some ways that works very well, that their fellow students are also people that they need to respect, culturally they've got to be doing that, so that's really helpful for us. So we've had some good results there.

The CHAIR — In terms of the program, is there sort of mentoring as part of the program? Do you try and get them linked in with some of the Elders?

Mr GUTHRIE — Probably an area that we haven't fully got functional yet. We have a number of key support staff. We've got a female support officer, a male support officer, we've got probably got - actually got indigenous youth mobility program. It's set up by DEST originally to bring kids from remote communities around Australia to major centres to train. It's a partnership between TAFE and ASHE that brings a staff member, a mentor into our staff. We've got another male staff member whose role is now evolved. He's been with us from the start, Jason Briggs, who was going to be here today, started as our support officer but he got to the end, but his role changed. So his job is basically to work with the school system to make sure ASHE is not being a barrier to kids, you know, making sure it's working to promote education and re-engage and continue education in the school system if possible, and I think where I sit probably the biggest thing that I need to get cracking on is this idea of three days a week back into the school system, two days a week to ASHE. That's not set up, but I think that's been because of a bit of lack of time. I'd love to think by next year that ASHE could be running that joint

school ASHE partnership so the kids can have an opportunity to join ASHE but not at the detriment of going to school. That's definitely on the agenda of our program development.

I suppose ASHE is different to a school in that it's smaller numbers, it's a range of ages and it does take a very employment and personal development focus approach because I think in what we've seen that's the most pressing thing that the young people need to address. I suppose underneath that is an assumption that employers want - there are certain attributes that employers want from a young person that they're going to employ. As long as you can tick most of those boxes, I think most employers would say they can teach the job. They just want a lot of the shit sorted out, if I can put it that way.

That's largely the role that ASHE is playing. That gets back to the five key areas of development that we focussed on, which I mentioned before. While it's five years old, I think there's a lot of thought gone into it and a lot of process, but I think realistically ASHE is four or five years away from being on a sound footing where it really has a confident look to 10/20/30 year future. Our funding is until the middle of next year through the State Government, so I mean Justin, that's one of his primary concerns right now is to get ASHE refinanced for ongoing.

Mr HALL — Is it funded through the Education Department?

Mr GUTHRIE — Yes. It was a unique set-up which only Justin could explain, the four sectors of Education, Health, Aboriginal Affairs and Sport and Recreation. They came, four ministers came together to fund it in a unique way. I'm not privy to the exact details; it was rather unique.

There is a report that I did submit. It captures a few of the photos and some of the statistics, yeah.

MR ELASMAR — How important is it for Aboriginals to stay in the local community and how difficult is it to go to other universities?

Ms CRUMPEN — Really, I think it's social economic background. Usually, you know, to send and financially support a child outside of community is quite difficult, and yeah I think so basically we find that indigenous students will have to financially support themselves. They just don't have that back-up with their parents' income to be able to support them with accommodation and that sort of stuff. So really I guess there's many things that probably impact or social factors that would impact on why indigenous people wouldn't move out of their community. Close ties to country and family are there and that support network is there. Often going away to universities and those kind of things are quite daunting because they're totally different environments. Families haven't had experience in those environments before so can't talk through what it's going to be like in those kind of things in those environments. So even trying to give that kind of support, understanding the systems of how you enrol, those kinds of things.

That's where I think ASHE is valuable. It knows those systems, it's got a careers officer that can support students if they want to go down that track in working out how they enrol. You know, deciding which university is appropriate, which degree to do is appropriate in your career path that you want to take, what kind support services are there in that does it have an indigenous unit or liaison officer that they can talk to, to work through any issue, understanding timetables and those kind of things, especially from a university perspective, and universities do often have that support, it's just making that link and yeah, so there's a few factors, I guess, that stops a person from taking up that opportunity, but yeah, we're slowly working through them.

Mr GUTHRIE — My perspective is that they're tied to their community very strongly. Whatever their community of origin, tribal community, they're very strong and that would never leave. I think if you can get to the point where they went to Melbourne and study or whatever, they would never lose that attachment. I guess a bit unlike us, I was born in a town called Cootamundra, but I don't think that's special to me but in the same way it rings true to an Aboriginal person, a connection to his historic lands and where they were born and that sort of stuff, where their family comes from is really strong and powerful.

Ms CRUMPEN — I should also say that having to face discrimination and those kind of things outside of having to come back to as in terms of the support group, if you go to Melbourne it's two hours away. If you don't have transport, if you don't have the financial backing to even catch a train and come back and debrief and those kinds of thing, it can be daunting to take those steps as well. There's a lot of factors in there that a young indigenous person or an older indigenous person has to work through.

If you're a mature-aged student too and want to go back to uni, a lot of people have established families and those kind of things. So it's all that kind of thing as well, transport issues and a whole heap of things come up for people.

The CHAIR — Thank you for coming along and sharing that with us. It's useful to hear how your program is operating here in the mix.

WITNESSES WITHDREW

CORRECTED VERSION

EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

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

Benalla-3 March 2009

Members

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Witnesses

Ms J. Norling, divisional manager, service industries, and
Ms B. Kaur, manager, Multicultural Education Centre, Goulburn Ovens Institute of TAFE

The CHAIR — Welcome to the inquiry. Thank you for coming along. While we've been in Benalla today we've heard from a broad range of groups, whether it's the school, council, universities that are operating in the area. So we've certainly had plenty of the references to TAFE and Go TAFE in particular. So we're interested to talk with you about what your offering is in the area and the issues that you found in terms of young people from the area to go onto higher education.

Ms NORLING — I'm the divisional manager for what we call service industries with TAFE, and so I work closely with ASHE, multicultural nursing, community services, aged care, health and what we call the learning skills unit. I also have a view over the whole of TAFE in terms of what we do right across the board.

But today what we're going to talk about is predominantly the multicultural centre, and Balvinder is the manager of the multicultural centre in Shepparton and that is based in Shepparton, but we look at how we provide programs elsewhere. So she will talk specifically about some of those things.

Through the Multicultural Education Centre we probably got three main programs we deliver. One is an adult migrant English program, which is the hours that come through the Department of Immigration and Citizenship for new arrivals, and they're 510 hours plus if they've got special needs.

We deliver the integrative humanitarian settlement strategy which is for the refugees settling in Shepparton, and it is basically Shepparton, and then we do what we call State Government funded programs in an English course and other courses that Balvinder will talk about, some of the specialist programs.

In terms of writing down the key things that I think impact in terms of pathways to higher education, one of the issues that I think faces our AME peek clients is the issue for those 16 year-olds who come in and where do they go because at the moment they're really - they have to go into schools and there are 16-year-olds who have seen all sorts of things, been all sorts of places, experienced a whole lot of things and all of a sudden they're put into a school sitting in a year 10 classroom and they often don't stick at it. For them to come to us where they're in an adult learning environment sometimes where they feel more comfortable, they're not eligible unless we show that the school can't provide them with a program which is a real change. So those young people don't have the choices that some of the others do.

TAFE, as you're probably aware, is moving more into the higher qualifications at the moment. We offer a number of diplomas, advanced diplomas, looking at articulation into higher education, and it's a real pathway for lots of young people who don't necessarily have the wherewithal in terms of finances, ability to travel to Melbourne, et cetera, to start to move into a degree program and get some real - get some support in the local town in their local community to get the basis and then articulate into a higher qualification. So I see that the issue around the 16-year-olds who often don't even go to secondary school and then come to us maybe later to access funded programs is a bit of a concern.

One of the other things I wanted to mention is as we have students, and we have a number of students particularly in Shepparton who are from a non-English speaking background going into certificates 4, diplomas and now advanced diplomas, often they need some English language support to assist them with that, and with the skills reform changes that are happening in Victoria, we suspect we're going to be in the position where they won't be eligible for English language classes to support the work they're doing in their mainstream programs, and one of the things we've found - and Balvinder will talk about some of the trades and some of the vocational programs where we've targeted newly arrived communities - having the vocational skills training alongside English language classes that are relevant to their area of study is absolutely critical for successful completion.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Is it happening now or not?

Ms NORLING — We are doing it. At the moment we can use certificate 3 in spoken and written English to do some modules there which support them doing, say, certificate 3 children's services, or it can be a certificate 4 in aged care or a diploma in children's services.

In the future what we think is going to happen is that they would no longer - if they've completed a certificate 3 they will no longer be able to access a certificate 3 in spoken and written English because they won't be able to get the Government funded hours to support them, and it's something that we're really keen to make sure doesn't happen. So it is a potential issue for those young people into the future.

We do have lots of students who go through, they may come to the Multicultural Education Centre for a short time and then go into one of the mainstream programs. They may come to the Multicultural Education Centre and go into a vocational program that's for students from a non-English speaking background or they may come straight from school into a certificate 4 or diploma course. There's a whole range of ways. We try to offer support to those young people and older ones as well to make sure that the channels of being successful are as high as we can make them. A lot of it is done informally with individual teachers, just knowing somebody and helping, but I don't think that's sustainable.

We have a language literacy and numeracy program across TAFE which gives them 10 hours. Often that's not enough, 10 hours in a year is not enough to do that, whereas if we can use the Government funded programs, we can enrol them in three or four modules under certificate 3 or certificate 4 and provide that ongoing support over a longer period of time.

Perhaps at this stage I'll pass to Balvinder to talk about some of the – Balvinder is the person who organised a lot of vocational programs and pilot programs we've been running for the Department of Immigration.

Ms KAUR — What I will talk about traditionally what we did at the multicultural centre is deliver programs. When more people came, we wanted vocational outcomes and employment. So what we did we had a vocational program and the language support, we ran for example certificate 3 children's services together with English language support, so normally we have two teachers there and have sessions to help them specially designed to non-English speaking background clients. It has been very successful. Out of ten we have had 7 who graduated early this year.

We have started another group. We also do hospitality with language support. We do business, we do IT. So that way they have two qualifications at the same time. They get the English and they get the vocational focus programs as well, and then from there on sometimes they go on to mainstream to do higher diploma or some of them have actually gone on to university.

So that's what we are actually doing, but what we have also started was - this is funded by the Department of Immigration and citizenship. We have started pilots. We started them late last year. There were two. One was the trade. This was aimed for men with very low literacy skills. What we did was we gave them a bit of welding, we gave them automotive and furnishing. At the end of the sort of - they did different workshops, they had language support, communication skills as well and they went for work placement. At the end of the work placement, the focus of these pilot is actually further vocational training or employment outcomes. Out of the 13 in this pilot, 6 have already gained employment and another 5 are going for further training. We are doing this pilot again this year.

For the other pilot we had pathways to professional work. This is aimed at people who had some form of formal qualifications from their home company and their literacy skills are a bit better. We gave them resume writing, how to write a cover letter, more of employment, very much, very focussed on employment outcomes. There were 13 in this program. They went for work placement. Once again of the 13 five have gained employment and another five are going on to further training, and I think these have been very successful but there has to be a need. There's a need for language support and vocational. We can't just leave them and some of them can go into mainstream, but they need that support, that language support so that the transition is smoother and they also have, I suppose, culturally they feel a bit uncomfortable because I think the education system is different, the educational environment is different, culture is very different, so they need that motivation.

I think another thing from a cultural aspect they've been doing, vocation in trade areas is very low because in their countries they look at plumbers, mechanics, they want to be doctors and lawyers. What we have started doing is have information sessions and tell them like in Australia it's very different. Trades are on par, they're equally good, you can earn a lot of money. So they're trying to change that culture and that has been partly successful.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Who should pay for these language services? The Federal Government or the State Government?

Ms NORLING — That's a good question. The students get their 510 free hours no doubt about that.

Mr KOTSIRAS — You're saying that's not enough plus the ones who have gone through trauma gets more, but you're saying that's not enough.

Ms NORLING — Absolutely. What I'm saying that for some of them, depending on where they want to go, that gives them the grounding. It's for those who want to go into higher qualifications in particular, that's really difficult for them. You know, very few of them come out with enough skills at the end of 510 hours to be able to go into a higher qualification.

Mr KOTSIRAS — So perhaps the feds should increase the 510.

Ms NORLING — If there is a scheme by they're continuing their study, the English language study supported for, yes. I'm not necessarily saying everybody needs a thousand hours or 1500 hours or whatever, and I know some they're talking about where the savings you make on one person you might be able to use for another, et cetera. Yeah, that's all fine, but I think if we're talking about people you know, for example some of our Afghani ladies who had never held a pen before they came to us, they get their 510 hours, they want to go in and do children services et cetera. The 510 runs out in about six to eight months. The next year they want to do children's services, they really need the support through that program. It's amazing how with support that they can fly, but it's just a matter of having that available for them along the way so that, and as Balvinder said, that was developed with the children's services, they did the theoretical part, if you like, with somebody who was sensitive to the needs of the group and then they had groups so that they had time to actually work through the assessment materials and their assignments and things like that and workshop those effectively.

Ms KAUR — If I can add we have clients who have wanted to participate but they can't because they have finished their 510 hours. They want employment, but we can't run programs.

Ms NORLING — I think that's the key thing. The vast majority of the students that come through want employment outcomes. I think that's been a key learning, if you like.

If we went back a few years ago, the Multicultural Education Centre, we measured our success about how the students came back year after year after year. Retention was great. They were moving on within their English language but they weren't taking a step outside into some of these areas that would lead to employment. So I think that's been a key learning for us that we have to actually give them a pathway into employment.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Which countries do most of the refugees come from?

Ms NORLING — In Shepparton, there's still a lot of Iraqis, people in Shepparton who could access the programs. Some of them haven't used all their hours.

Our new arrivals now are generally from Afghanistan and we run a pilot proper with Congolese, several females of Congolese. We've been getting numbers Sudanese coming either as a secondary migration resettling from Melbourne because they find Melbourne isn't the place they want to live with their families, or people who have come in to rejoin families, Sudanese families.

So probably the two key groups are Sudanese and Afghani.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Do you think the local schools have got the services available to service the needs of the students?

Ms NORLING — I think there's been significant changes over the last few years with the English language centre being developed. I was actually with the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development up until 2006 so I had dealings there with that.

The English Language Centre that was in place before that was an informal arrangement using alternative set examples of funding which wasn't a particularly successful strategy. Setting up the English Language Centre I think has been a plus in that it is now developing an expertise around working with young people with language needs.

Having said that, I think all the schools would agree that they need more to do it because some of the kids coming in have never been to school.

Mr KOTSIRAS — More of what? More teachers, two teachers in the classroom, more books, more what?

Ms NORLING — No, I think it's people. It's about having the right people in place. Having materials available in all the languages is an issue for schools and for ourselves. Everything always seems to be a couple of years behind. So when we have needed Swahili, there was nothing in Swahili. Now our Congolese families have been here a number of years and we're starting to get the materials. That's always an issue about getting things in languages when you need them as opposed to later on with the newly arrived families, but it is about having people with the right skills in place to help and that's in terms of teachers and multicultural education aids, getting the right balance because schools still have to feel a sense of responsibility for those young people, whereas there has been in the past sometimes with a whole range of groups, I've worked in disabilities, it's when there's an aid it's no longer the teachers' responsibilities because the aid looks after it and you've got that as well.

It's not a simple answer, but I'm sure the schools would say if they had more staff, particularly with the right language skills, that would be great. The Multicultural Education Centre is delivering training for multicultural aids as we speak on behalf of the department.

Ms KAUR — We started a certificate 3 in education last year in combination with Department of Child and Early Education. They service all the multicultural aids that are currently in schools but have not got qualifications. This is so they come to us and every fortnight we run a class but they are still working with different schools around Shepparton. We have also put a few from TAFE itself so that they can go into classrooms to help teachers because we do need - we need bilingual aid workers. Just having an English language teacher doesn't work. There are times when you can't translate from English another language. There is no equivalent, so we need people there.

There are several issues. Like today I must say I've got family violence, I've got husband abuse, child abuse issues, everything coming to me because it's multicultural education. Anyone who looks or speaks different comes to me. I've spent three hours dealing with one case, three days ago I dealt with a person who doesn't know where to go so she came to me. All these things come to us because we're multicultural. So we need a lot of people, we need a lot of money, we need more hours. Whatever you can do to help us.

MR ELASMAR — I know you said the language is very difficult, but do they understand how they can explain to the children about further education, do you have that knowledge?

Ms NORLING — Last year there was a group in Shepparton to organise a parent information session for the parents and the young people themselves with interpreters, there was schools, Department of Education, Go TAFE. So there was a slide show, so there were interpreters there to explain the variety of pathways that you could go from year 12 to university or you could go year 10 to this, and so they had that presentation which was

good and I think the feedback from it was really good. They also got just even to walk around a TAFE campus because we actually have TAFE and La Trobe University on the same campus there in Shepparton, so just for them to walk around and see. Lots of them just don't realise what's available in their local community. Having the interpreters there is a key part of that.

Mr KOTSIRAS — I understand extra staff will cost more money. Have you had a professional development, cultural awareness for staff or teaching staff to come along and go through a course whereby they go back into the school and they can react accordingly?

Ms NORLING — In terms of schools, TAFE doesn't generally offer a lot of training to schools. Schools would see that's the role of higher education rather than a TAFE. There's certainly a pecking order that's seen in terms of - the majority of teachers would see themselves as professionals who have degrees and TAFE do certificates.

Mr KOTSIRAS — This is just a one-day in-service.

Ms NORLING — Yes, I know that. We've been trying to get teachers into schools to come to a day for cultural awareness for careers teachers working with indigenous students. We cannot get it up. We tried three times last year and it's not on their list of priorities. So it's difficult. I'm not saying what we couldn't be doing; I'm just saying we need to somehow get the schools to commit to doing it. I know having been in schools all of the competing pressures, et cetera, but particularly in places like Shepparton if they're not willing to step up and do the training, yeah, what do you do?

The CHAIR — So the younger migrant or refugee children who might start off in primary school, how are they adopting and is there opportunity for them to keep moving up through the system and perhaps go on to tertiary?

Ms NORLING — In terms of saying a student coming in prep, there's support in Shepparton through the English Language Centre and the multicultural aids in their schools. The majority of them, I think, who start young are successful. They have the time to get the skills, et cetera. The ones that I've been most concerned about are the ones that come in, the 14/15, 16/17 and they're coming in - for the boys they come in and they feel a loss of status that they can't speak like all the other boys around them, they can't participate in things. So that can be really hard for them. The girls are more likely just to stop attending school, so they drop out. The boys yeah. It's hard for them.

Ms KAUR — I think there's no support in terms of this 16-year-old people. There's a lack of sight because if they go to school they don't really fit in, they can't go to year 10 or 11. The schools usually say 'You're not going to make it; go to TAFE'. When they come to us, they say 'My parents are in TAFE'.

Ms NORLING — Yeah, 'I don't want to come to TAFE because my parents come here to do English'.

Ms KAUR — So I think there has to be something else that we can offer them which at present is not there.

Mr HALL — I go back to that issue under Skills Reform, if you're literally reading the document itself, to have a funded position. Have you sought clarification from that with the Government?

Ms NORLING — I haven't got an answer back yet. We are trying to clarify it, but a good example might be to have what we call functioning English. They need to have completed certificate 2 minimum. Now that then means that any certificate 1 or 2 course elsewhere would be - they would be ineligible as you read the guidelines at the moment. It doesn't just apply for two people coming from a non-English background. If it was a certificate for general education for adults, it would be the same. While they talk about those being foundation skills, it's unclear whether certificate 2 or certificate 3 in spoken or in written English, or certificate in general education for

adults, whether it will be a foundation course or whether it will be the next level up, we have sought clarification. I think verbally we're told it doesn't apply to them but we still haven't got anything in writing that actually tells us that's the case. They're, no doubt, still working through what that means and the ramifications of that.

You don't want people circulating through certificate 2 year after year after year because that's what Skills Reform was trying to prevent. But perhaps these programs don't count in terms of eligibility.

Mr HALL — In respect to higher education, do you have many refugees coming to the country with a higher qualification education either as in difficulty in terms of having them recognised in Australia or the need to undertake some higher education in Australia to have their qualification recognised?

Ms KAUR — I have so many, but if you say pathways for them to gain employment here is almost non-existent. I've got teachers, I've got doctors, I've got engineers, I've got everyone sitting in the class, but there are no pathways. Once again they are forgotten.

Two issues, one for the 16-year-old, one for the professionals. We say that we don't have professionals. I've got all the professionals, but the jobs are not there, and in terms of training, the government has done nothing for them to look into this issue. It's a major, major issue.

I've got two doctors. One is a neurologist, I think. I've got another lady, another doctor. I've got so many professionals, but where's the training?

Ms NORLING — For example, a teacher we were liaising with at La Trobe University to see if we could get her into a teaching course because she was told for registration she had to do an upgrade here. She had to have, they said they would take her if she had an IELTS of about 5.5. Where does she go to, to get that English language training to get her up to a 5.5? We have a certificate 4 at about 4.5. So that's the highest level that we can offer through our programs. Where does she access the additional English language?

Mr KOTSIRAS — If she got that education, would she find a job?

Ms NORLING — As a teacher in Shepparton, if she had -

Mr KOTSIRAS — So all the people coming to you, assuming they are able to go into a course and graduate, they will get jobs?

Ms KAUR — Yes, definitely. At present, I mean I can understand they are frustrated. What pathways would they have? Okay, I've got doctors, go do RACGP. Fine. They take ten years.

Ms NORLING — Balvinder's husband is a doctor, so she knows all of this stuff.

Ms KAUR — You haven't got an adequate IELTS.

From June they're going to raise the standard to 7.5 in June. You won't even gain a six, I can tell you that. So they keep raising the bar, but at the same time there are no support structures. Okay for engineers, what training, they say 'Go, do RPL(?)'. They do that and come back again. 'Okay, now do this training'. Sometimes I don't know. It's just a vicious circle and I'm seeing many of them go through that. In the end they just give up. They don't try any more.

Mr KOTSIRAS — I had someone come to my office who did a course and graduated. He could not find a job for two years. It's a cultural thing more than anything else in Melbourne. I'm not sure up here.

Ms NORLING — In Shepparton it is probably different than Benalla. In Shepparton there's probably more acceptance of the diversity than a place like Benalla or somewhere like that. It would depend on the language.

Mr HALL — Who sets that English standard? Is it the industry associations themselves or government?

Ms KAUR — The government and professional associations. If it's a language rich course, for example it's law or medical, it's 7.5. If you're talking about IT, probably go down about 6. It all depends on -

Mr HALL — It's the Royal Institute of the College of Surgeons or whatever?

Ms KAUR — Yes.

Ms NORLING — There's got to be that gap training for English language skills to get them up to that level. One of the programs we offered previously Balvinder designed and delivered a program for overseas trained doctors in terms of assisting them to get their registration here in Australia. Now a significant part of that course was around English language skills because you're talking about understanding slang and idiom and the cultural differences. The questions you could ask, how to interpret how somebody responded to you. From our point of view it might be really clear; from somebody's else's view it's quite confusing. So there is definitely a gap there.

WITNESSES WITHDREW