

# CORRECTED VERSION

## EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

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

Melbourne — 3 March 2008

#### Members

Mr M. Dixon

Mr N. Elasmarr

Mr P. Hall

Dr A. Harkness

Mr S. Herbert

Mr G. Howard

Mr N. Kotsiras

Chair: Mr G. Howard

Deputy Chair: Mr N. Kotsiras

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#### Witness

Dr H. Coates, principal research fellow, Australian Council for Educational Research.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — I declare this hearing of the Education and Training Committee open. The committee is hearing evidence today in relation to the inquiry into geographical differences in the rate in which Victorian students participate in higher education. I wish to advise that all evidence taken by the committee, including submissions, is subject to parliamentary privilege. I welcome Dr Coates from the Australian Council for Educational Research. Can I ask you to give a brief outline for, say, 15 minutes, and we will follow up with some questions?

**Dr COATES** — I am Hamish Coates from the Australian Council for Educational Research. My role within the organisation is to look after higher education research within ACER, situated in an area called transitions and post-school education, in which we look at a wider range of issues concerned with transitions, obviously, and also vocational education and overlap between the two.

I am here representing ACER. A letter was sent to our CEO, Geoff Masters, asking if he and/or Phil McKenzie could present. I am here on their behalf largely to talk about ACER's work on LSAY, albeit indirectly, for reasons that I will say, but also just to give a national picture which draws on what research there is — and the answer to that is 'not much' — in general so that we can look at what might be done in terms of developing practice in this area looking forward.

I am going to speaking directly to (b), (d), (e) and (g) of the terms of reference and might touch upon the others, but I am not going to talk about specific matters in terms of the application numbers, specific issues to do with articulation and TAFE and VET and those kinds of matters, or specific matters in relation to geographic differences. So I will be keeping a rather broad perspective for reasons that I will detail.

The sources of evidence are largely work done by a former colleague of mine, and still a colleague, Richard James, who I understand is presenting here at 2 o'clock, when I used to work at the Centre for the Study of Higher Education before moving to ACER, and also an overview of the results from three specific reports written out of the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth project that ACER managed for some time.

I am going to talk firstly about what appears to be going on in relation to geographic differences in participation in higher education in Victoria — what are our knowledge-base limitations — because I think unless we actually know what is going on on a routine basis it limits our capacity to develop and measure the impact of policies that can have change, and then summarise with a few possible directions for moving us forward.

We have to put this into a systemic context in higher education in which a higher education degree is becoming a lot more important. We have had since 1990 a national equity framework in Australian higher education which across the world is quite an innovative development, that being to have a national framework. We have got a lot of institutions making a lot of institution-specific changes and initiatives, and perhaps Richard will talk about some of them later on, specifically the work that Melbourne University, for example, is doing at Shepparton or Richard Larkins may in relation to Monash University's work. Yet this all happens in a context in which we know very little about students' decision-making in higher education, and we know very little about the actual tracking of students, how they move throughout the educational systems and how they leave the systems.

The first system I will start with is the school system, because it is quite clear from what we know on hard data — that is, data from administrative systems and enrolments — that early school leaving or early school departure is the first problem in terms of ensuring that students from provincial and remote areas can access higher education at rates at which, particularly under the national equity framework, we would anticipate that that could be the case.

We know that urban completion rates for secondary school are about 10 percentage points higher than those for students from provincial and remote areas, and the rates for females in those regional and remote areas in particular are lower than they are for males. I will say more on that later on. We know that these rates remain when controlled for parental education and the early achievement of the students. It is not necessarily to do with an indicator of socioeconomic status of student aptitude; there seems to be something else going on.

**Mr HALL** — Hamish, could I interrupt? Are these Victorian figures or Australian figures?

**Dr COATES** — They are Australian figures. I have liaised with colleagues who have done recent work in Victoria from a Monash perspective, and they appear to be resonant with what is going on in Victoria. Travel time and cost appear to be issues affecting early school leaving; school staffing difficulties; students needing to take up paid work; a decreased value placed on schooling perhaps in regional and remote areas; expectations and attitudes

of students particularly in the final years of secondary school we know are very critical in shaping perceptions of the value and costs of higher education; and limitations in curriculum and resources at the school level can certainly shape what opportunities students confront further down the track.

However, we know even for students that finish year 12 their ENTER scores tend to be 3 to 4 percentage points lower than they do for students finishing school in metropolitan areas, which tends to suggest that there may well be a confound in the measurement of student achievement that is affected by geographic location.

There is a range of other considerations that have been suggested in research literature. I will not go over the findings in detail. Some or a lot of them do not have an empirical basis, but they certainly have traction in the conversations that go on within universities. One of them comes to the point of discouraging factors: students looking at year 10 or 12 to a whole range of potential uncertainties, costs and unknown returns from higher education.

Some speak of rural attitudes in the literature, which can, as we know, affect student expectations which, as we know, in year 10, towards the final years of secondary schooling, are shaping what is going to be possible if one were to continue as a school leaver through to higher education. We have got to place all of this into a context where we know that a large number of students nationally do not enter higher education as school leavers.

Access to university from students in regional and remote areas appears to be a mix of socioeconomic status, rurality and proximity to a campus, but we know that for various reasons proximity to a campus may not be a relevant consideration. The campus may not be in an institution the student wants to attend, or it may not offer the course mix that the student is interested in pursuing. It comes down to a bundle of factors in which we know socioeconomic status and rurality play a role, but we simply do not know much more than that.

We know that there is a perceptions issue with students. I have spoken about that. Once students get to higher education we know that students from remote areas can often leave more — that is, there is increased departure from students from remote areas than there is from students in provincial areas, who are actually more likely to stay than their metro counterparts. We know that there are no geographic differences in course change. Students from different geographic regions, when they hit higher education institutions, are not necessarily going to change their courses.

What we do know is that there is a lack, as I said before, of measurement. There are problems with the metrics that we use to study these phenomena — I will go into more detail later on — which limit what we can say about what is going on. The LSAY data — the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth data that that I referred to — is national in scope. By the time we get down to a state-specific analysis, it can have limitations.

Remote and rural participation and access in Victoria is below the national average. The national average in 2006 was 18.65 per cent for access and 17.88 per cent for participation for rural students. In Victoria it was 17.3 per cent for access. In 2006 for remote students it was 1.28 per cent for access, and participation rates — this is not first-year students — were 1.13 per cent. In Victoria it was 0.28 per cent.

There is a caveat there: Victoria has far fewer remote regions than other states in Australia. Clearly the rates are low nonetheless, and that has to be phrased within a national equity framework in higher education, as I say, that had target rates in 2002 — there are probably updated figures, but they would still be in the same ballpark — of 24.3 per cent access for rural students and 4.5 per cent access for isolated or remote students. The figures clearly are not looking good, and we have to put this in a context of 17 years of a national equity framework.

What is more, we know that retention rates for rural and isolated students have remained relatively flat — again within a context of a national equity framework — and retention rates for isolated students have actually gone down. We know in particular that male retention rates have gone down and are probably the biggest concern in this area — that is, getting male students from regional areas in Australia to stay in Australian higher education.

Looking at Victorian institutions, if we frame them within the context of the national equity framework, we can see two — that is, La Trobe and Ballarat — that have more students from non-urban areas than would be expected. Most Victorian institutions have somewhere between 8 and 20 per cent, and many are below or around 10 per cent; again, this is after 17 years of a national equity framework and, in many institutions, substantial investments in terms of setting up regional campuses and networks with feeder schools.

We can see that a few of those schools — again, La Trobe and Ballarat — are above the state average, Deakin is above the state average, but the others remain below the state average, with the state average, of course, being already below the national equity framework target point. For remote students the picture is much the same; there are just much lower levels of participation again there.

I will move to talking about knowledge-based limitations — first of all, what we do not know. We do not know much, because there is not much research in the area. The data that we do have — as opposed to the work that is done within institutions or the conversations that people have — is scant. This, again, is in the context of 17 years of a national equity framework.

The statistics that are collected are very broadbrush in two ways: the units that are used for measurement are very poor, we use a postcode measure which is good — although possibly not — but we believe it is a good broadbrush measure. In 2004 for the commonwealth me and colleagues at the CSHE undertook a national review of the higher education equity framework, and we concluded that the postcode measure was a good broadbrush measure for reporting purposes but really for targeting and measuring change far too aggregated a measure. What is more, the postcode conflates rurality and socioeconomic status so it is very hard to differentiate socioeconomic status once you have taken rurality into account and that can make a difference.

**Mr HERBERT** — Just on that point, why could you not just simply use the EMA — the numbers of parents that are on the EMA for schools in postcodes — to differentiate them?

**Dr COATES** — Yes, and that is a good point of conversation. There is a gap in the statistics collections between school collections, which are largely state-held of course, and the higher education collections in which equity is measured in two different ways.

**Mr HERBERT** — Presumably states could forward on the EMA data and there could be correspondence so they could be correlated?

**Dr COATES** — With linking of databases this would be possible, certainly. Yes. We do not know how much about how problems with ENTER score is obscuring what we know in this area but if there are context factors associated with a lower ENTER score then potentially ENTER score is obscuring or lowering potential applicants' ability to enter and succeed in higher education. We do not have a firm grip — and you will no doubt develop such a view during the inquiry — on what local communities are doing to support students as they go through school and potentially move towards higher education and the study of pathways, in particular between VET or the vocational sectors and the higher education sectors is always an area in which we need to know more.

How could we overcome these kinds of limitations? Linked databases. Develop separate measures of socioeconomic status and regionality, and there is increasingly sophisticated metrics out there. This year ACER is piloting a national university selection test called the uni TEST, the idea underpinning that being to find hidden talent that may not be evident in year 12 achievement scores. There is also of course the Special Tertiary Admissions Test which is used for non-school leavers or mature-age students. Mature-age, however, being defined in different ways at different institutions.

We can undertake work — and institutions already are — to change students' perceptions of the value of higher education, particularly if students are from first-in-family. We do not have a good measure in Australia of the extent to which students are the first student in their family to attend higher education and develop insight into certain debt obligations, cost of living expenses once they move to the cities particularly if they move to regional areas where there is not so much part-time work for students to do. We know that most students in higher education are undertaking often up to 30 hours a week part-time employment. Well it is not part-time but it is in the context of full-time studies. And we can learn more about decision-making in relation to higher education. We still do not have a firm measure on the factors that shape students' decisions in the senior secondary years at school.

To summarise, early school leaving is a problem as it limits transition into university. ENTER scores appear to be influenced by location and could well be supplemented by more objective measure of ability. That arguably is not confounded by geographic location. Access participation rates of rural and provincial students below those for urban students and the picture is not changing, even after 17 years. The problem is particularly bad for males. Rural and remote students are disproportionately spread across a small number of institutions, even though all institutions have policy and the funds available to support rural and remote students. Measurement and data limitations mask what is known. It appears that we need a new approach to identify hidden talent, to track transitions and pathways,

to determine how to reduce barriers and to learn how to shape students' decision-makings and expectations in the final years of secondary school.

**The CHAIR** — Thanks, Hamish. We will now move to some questions.

**Mr HERBERT** — Yes, I will kick off. In regard to the Victorian test and how we compare in terms of access — it could be access or whatever — I am interested in whether a basic difference is in a university campus, in a location or what and in particular I would be interested to know how our universities compare in terms of rural and regional campuses with our interstate comparisons and whether that makes a difference.

**Dr COATES** — Yes. A complete response to that question I will have to take on notice but in short I suspect a lot of that research is not public but conducted by particular institutions and I think a good point of departure would be to get that institution's specific research. I know Monash, for example, does a large amount of research mapping not only for marketing purposes but for these kinds of purposes to build this information. I am not aware of publicly available information that could answer that question.

**Mr HERBERT** — What about just campuses? Melbourne might not have any, Deakin has a few. Are other interstate universities about the same or do they tend to have a more devolved model?

**Dr COATES** — The multicampus nature of institutions tends to be fairly consistent around the country.

**Mr HERBERT** — There is no state that is outstanding? Does Queensland have more outside of Brisbane?

**Dr COATES** — Not that I know of. Certainly there are in other states more institutions with their central chancellery located out of the capital city than there may be in Victoria. I am not sure what that would imply but if we look at Queensland or New South Wales, for example, that is the case.

**Dr HARKNESS** — Just following up on that. You have provided some data on both access and participation rates, comparing Victoria with the commonwealth and geographic areas. I wonder whether you have any data on the deferral and completion rates and whether there are any geographic differences there as well. Are people from some geographic areas commencing a course and not completing it or deferring it indefinitely?

**Dr COATES** — We know, I think I mentioned from the LSAY data, that remote students are more likely not to be retained at university but students from provincial areas are equally likely to be retained as their urban counterparts.

**Dr HARKNESS** — Through to completion?

**Dr COATES** — Through to completion. Yes. Again, that is a national picture.

**Mr HALL** — Thanks, Hamish, for your presentation. Could you explain to me again what is the national equity framework?

**Dr COATES** — In 1990 a paper was released called *A Fair Chance for All* in which it set up the definition of specific equity groups and processes for measuring performance against targets that were at that point defined. That framework largely remained the same until 2002, a year in which we undertook not a conceptual review but certainly an empirical review of the performance of a longitudinal nature. It is monitored routinely by the commonwealth department but not in an analytical sense.

We proposed the inclusion of a handful of further groups but no major change. It is clear that non-English speaking background students probably by the objective criteria should not be included as an equity group any more. It is also clear that males are a disadvantaged group in certain areas such as nursing and teaching and there was a host of other recommendations. It is my understanding that those recommendations have not been put into practice.

**Mr HALL** — So is rural and remote a separate equity group under that framework?

**Dr COATES** — Yes. Regionality — I forget the precise wording — is an equity group and within that there is remote and isolated categories.

**Mr HALL** — Is it a framework used by all state governments and organisations like ACER, your company, and also VTAC — those other organisations? Do they use that framework?

**Dr COATES** — Yes. It is a framework for higher education providers and there is funding attached to that. There is separate funding attached for indigenous programs but it is used in the higher education system. I am not sure the extent to which it overlaps with frameworks in school systems and/or institution-specific programs which may well go beyond that. Victoria University, for example, has a charter to respond to students in the western regions of Melbourne, which is well outside of the national framework.

**The CHAIR** — So it is essentially a federally implemented framework around tertiary education?

**Dr COATES** — Yes.

**Mr HALL** — Could I ask if you have done any research work on the difference between government school students as opposed to non-government school students, and whether there is any reflection in that in terms of participation rates between urban areas and also regional, rural and remote?

**Dr COATES** — Work has been done by a colleague of mine by the name of Daniel Edwards and I can get you information on that. He was formerly at Monash. I know a lot of work has been done at Monash.

**Mr HALL** — It would be interesting to know whether the proportion of students attending non-government schools in the capital cities, for example, was different from that in regional, rural and remote areas and consequently whether that reflected at all in participation rates in higher education.

**Dr COATES** — Yes. I can provide that.

**Mr ELASMAR** — You mentioned that the cost was 10 per cent more for the males, that it was lower for the females? What was the reason for that?

**Dr COATES** — We do not know specifically. There may be attitudinal factors, there might be shaping of expectations of males, there might be more pressure to go and seek employment, or it may be that they are leaving school early to pursue vocational pathways. There has been no empirical study, although I think one thing that is underpinning this whole area is a lack of genuine empirical insight into what is going on. So we do not know.

**Mr DIXON** — On TAFE as a pathway to higher education, so far are there any trends in that state by state, or regional to city at all?

**Dr COATES** — Again, articulation matters are an area in which we do not have conclusive figures, particularly at a state level, but nationally it is a knowledge gap. The areas of transition are very much knowledge gaps.

**Mr HERBERT** — Just on the figures on the national equity framework process, universities used to be funded through a profile process. I would have thought if that profile process had been rigorous, then the targets or the outcomes sought in the national equity framework would have been a key part of that negotiated payment or funding process. I am not sure how the commonwealth funds universities now, but I would imagine it would be something similar to a profile but broader. I wonder whether you would see that more rigorous adherence to the negotiations with universities on their funding criteria around the national equity framework might achieve better results than we have seen.

**Dr COATES** — Four years ago a fund was developed called the Learning and Teaching Performance Fund, which has attracted a lot of criticism. It is a performance-based fund upon university teaching and learning performance. It has certainly resulted in a lot more emphasis being placed on teaching and learning activities within institutions. I am not sure it was a formal recommendation, but certainly an observation that was made by our 2004 review was that you would have to assume that the relatively small amount of funding, within the context of an entire institution, that is linked with meeting equity targets may well account for some of the flat lines we see when we look at these graphs.

**Mr HERBERT** — So in terms of a policy, what that report seems to say is that if you rejigged the way you fund universities and gave greater emphasis to equity, whether it be rural, regional or whatever, then you could have a broad tool for universities actually increasing participation? Is that more money?

**Dr COATES** — More money, yes.

**Mr HERBERT** — Not necessarily more money, but with strings attached?

**Dr COATES** — Yes.

**Mr KOTSIRAS** — Are you aware of any program initiatives interstate or overseas that assist with key geographical differences to close the gap?

**Dr COATES** — Australia is in a unique position in this particular area because we have a relatively small number of universities spread over or servicing a relatively large area. In the USA, for example, they have a university around every corner, even in very small towns. The short answer is no. I think we have our own context.

**Mr KOTSIRAS** — So how does New Zealand do it, where we have such a huge area?

**Dr COATES** — I am not sure. I can find out.

**Mr HERBERT** — What about Africa?

**Witness nodded.**

**The CHAIR** — Can I just check something too? In terms of the statistics you are talking about, have they stayed reasonably constant over the last 18-odd years?

**Dr COATES** — Yes. The overall number of students entering the system has gone up. The proportion of students from different geographical locations has remained the same. The targets are set by proportion, not by number, so we are treading water.

**The CHAIR** — Even though more distance learning opportunities are being offered by some universities, is that not making a difference to the statistics that have been achieved?

**Dr COATES** — On the relationship between distance provision and geographic location, I am not sure. Again it has not been looked at, but I am not sure if there would be a one-to-one correlation there. You might expect some correlation, but not necessarily.

**Mr HALL** — So what you have explained to us today, Hamish, is that there are a whole range of differences in completion rates, ENTER scores, participation rates in higher education and completion rates in higher education programs. Is anybody doing the research to understand the reasons why there are such differences?

**Dr COATES** — Not to my knowledge.

**Mr HALL** — And one of the primary recommendations you are making to this committee is that we need to understand why we do not have a good enough handle on it at the moment?

**Dr COATES** — Short of purely incentivising better practice, I think we need to understand — which might not entirely solve the problem, because institutions then will need to find out how they can make a change — what influences student decision making, how we can identify individual talent and shape that decision making so that we can build expectations about entering higher education degrees which we know are essential individuals.

**Mr HALL** — What about differences within urban areas? Are you aware and has ACER done any research or collation of material to suggest that similar differences exist within urban areas as well?

**Dr COATES** — There are an enormous number of studies going on at ACER, and it may well have, but not to my knowledge on that specific area. But again, colleagues have, and we know there are differences across the metropolitan region.

**The CHAIR** — Based on socioeconomic factors?

**Dr COATES** — Based on socioeconomic factors, yes. And we have fewer universities in the western region of Melbourne, but the participation rates are good.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you, Hamish. There is still some research material to come through?

**Dr COATES** — Yes.

**Witness withdrew.**



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#### Witness

Professor R. James, director, Centre for the Study of Higher Education, University of Melbourne.

**The CHAIR** — I welcome Professor Richard James, director of the Centre for the Study of Higher Education at Melbourne University. I expect you know that this hearing of the Education and Training Committee is taking evidence in relation to the inquiry into geographical differences in the rate in which Victorian students participate in higher education. I advise that the evidence by the committee, including submissions, is subject to parliamentary privilege — if you were not aware of that. That covers anything that is heard within this inquiry. We expect you to present to us some of your findings and suggestions and issues that the committee should be aware of, and then we will look forward to asking you some questions.

**Prof. JAMES** — I am from a research centre into higher education policy, the University of Melbourne's Centre for the Study of Higher Education. One of our strands of research is to do with equity in higher education. We have done various reports and studies over the last few years that are of direct relevance to this inquiry, but their focus is national rather than on Victoria alone, so I should stress that most of my remarks are drawn from the national setting rather than Victoria. You are welcome to any of these studies, but they would probably make you swim in excess data.

Just to illustrate some of the work we have done that is relevant, a few years ago we did a major national study of rural and isolated students and the gap in higher education participation. Similarly we did a major study of low socioeconomic-status students and the gap in higher education participation as well as lots of work on the participation of indigenous students in Australian higher education. Most recently we did a major study for Universities Australia on student finances while at university, which is related, albeit indirectly, to the sorts of things you are looking at. At the moment we are completing a very large literature review for Universities Australia on the gaps between low socioeconomic-status Australians and others in their access to university. That final report is being delivered to Universities Australia this week. We have much research that is relevant to what you are looking at.

I will describe the national picture as I see it. Your use of the expression 'geographical differences' is a bit odd from my point of view. I would probably prefer to refer to them as 'social differences'. The big picture is that low-SES Australians are about half as likely to go to university as other Australians. That is the broadbrush statistic which I think is quite appalling. About 60 per cent of rural Australians are likely to go, so they do a little bit better. Indigenous Australians are the worst subgroup in terms of access to university. The broad picture again though is that these groups of people once in university do almost as well as other students — slightly less well, but all things considered the gaps are not significant; and they probably are not relevant for policy purposes. The remarkable thing about this situation is that despite the expansion of access to Australian higher education over the last 15 years the proportion shares that I am referring to have not budged at all. You can expand the number of places, as far as we can tell, and you do not expand the share for people from low socioeconomic-status backgrounds. That is an international finding in mass higher education systems. No-one seems to have worked that out.

What I have told you so far are the broadbrush national proportions. It is even worse if you go into particular fields of study and into particular universities. Here the story does not surprise you, I am sure. In the most competitive and most desirable professional fields people from rural areas and from low socioeconomic-status backgrounds are even more underrepresented. The representation is worst in the so-called Group of Eight research-intensive universities. So there are also a set of equity issues there around the nature of the universities to which people are getting access because there is the question of: is all access equal or is there a different value that we might attach to different universities and different courses? I would argue that of course all higher education is not equal. There are courses that are of more intrinsic and career value and institutions likewise.

What are the reasons for this gap? Social class is really the predominant effect here. The best indicator of whether or not a young person will go on to university is parental education levels. It is not a perfect indicator but it is a superior indicator to other measures. Location is not a great indicator in itself, parental occupation is not a great indicator, but parental education levels certainly tell you much about a student's likelihood of going on to university. If you look at people from low socioeconomic-status backgrounds in Victoria — and no doubt you are meeting Richard Teese at some point — —

**The CHAIR** — We met him at the last hearing.

**Prof. JAMES** — Richard is really expert on this. If you look at the factors that prevailed against them getting into university they are to do with lower school completion rates, lower levels of school achievement and lower aspirations — less confidence in the value of getting into university and less confidence in personability to

get into university. Among those factors it is difficult to know which comes first. In other words, does lower aspirations precede lower school completion rates, or do lower aspirations precede lower school achievement levels, or vice versa? Richard Teese, if I am correct, will argue that in fact it is lower school achievement that is the precursor for lower school retention, lower school completion rates and lower aspirations with regard to education.

The reason I am stressing that is that many people think the differential access to higher education is to do with the perceived cost or the actual cost of going on to university. In fact it is far more closely related to levels of school achievement as far as we can tell from the data. Cost is an issue, of course, for some people, but cost comes in as a consideration once people have got to the point of transition — once they have got close to the point of considering university as an option. But many of the underrepresented groups that I am talking about have already left school by year 10 or year 11. University has not been on the horizon for a long time.

Now what might we do about this? I just want to say a couple of things, and then hand it over to you for questions. Getting better equity in higher education in Australia, and in that sense Victoria, is ultimately about improving school achievement levels for the groups that are underrepresented, and that is a wretchedly difficult challenge for communities all around the world. But most of the evidence shows that if you can improve school achievement levels and school retention improves, school completion improves and more options are available to people, that is looking only at the normal linear path into higher education. The other way to look at this problem is to consider that some people are going to leave school before completing and will return to higher education as mature-age students later in life, and that is a very valuable important pathway that many Australian universities, including Victorian universities, have been working on for some time.

What is the role of universities in all of this? Excuse me looking at it from a university point of view, but that is my area of research. Clearly there are limits on the capacity of universities to influence what is a significant, deep, social problem to do with educational achievement levels that begin in early childhood and stretch through primary and secondary. Universities have limited influence there, but my view is that universities can do a number of things to help, and I can run through those in detail if it is at all helpful to you, but it might not be pertinent now. But in saying that universities can do something to help, I want to stress that we are talking about a cross-sectoral educational issue where we need collaborative efforts, if you like, between schools, TAFE and universities if we are to do something significant to budge the figures. I might stop there.

**The CHAIR** — All right, although I think what you were about to say in terms of what universities could do probably is of interest to us in getting your feedback. Obviously we are trying to exercise our minds about what are the options that could be taken.

**Prof. JAMES** — One of the things that my university is doing, and others, is that we work back into schools in about year 8, year 9, year 10 level to help raise student awareness of what it is to go on to higher education, to help broaden their horizons about higher education. The schools that the University of Melbourne works with are schools that we have identified as being underrepresented in access to higher education for their students, but in particular schools that are underrepresented at the University of Melbourne. So all things being equal, we look at school achievement rates and we look at where their kids are going, and if they are, underrepresented overall or underrepresented at the University of Melbourne we send the SWAT squad out, if you like, and do some work with them. But there is now some good evidence internationally that university staff working with schools in years 9 or 10 helps raise aspirations, but you can imagine how costly and time intensive this sort of work is and in some ways it is not core business for universities to do this. Universities do it out of —

**The CHAIR** — Social conscience?

**Prof. JAMES** — Another significant thing that universities have to do, and this is a hugely political issue and I guess I should have said this more clearly earlier — one of the barriers of access to university is school achievement, as I said, but I should have gone further to say that the focus on ENTER score as the dominant selection device entry into university strongly prevails against some of the underrepresented groups that we have been talking about for the very reason that these young people are not achieving such high results at school.

Universities are in a bind here. Universities operate, in part, on the idea of merit, that you gain access to university on the basis of your school achievement, and that is a reasonably rational way for universities to operate. On the other hand universities do have a social conscience and a commitment to equity, and in order to exercise that they

really have to loosen up the grip that ENTER has got. One thing is for sure, a student's ENTER score in year 12 is not an ideal determinant of how well they will do once they are in higher education. That is something we have learned over the last few years. It is in some ways a predictor of student achievement at university, but obviously it is not the sole predictor. So if you wanted to wave the magic wand over Australia's higher education sector to make it more equitable, the first thing you would do is loosen the grip of ENTER as the dominant selection device. I am not suggesting that universities are not doing this already. Some are through alternative entry schemes and pathways through TAFE and these sorts of things. Universities have to provide scholarships for students who need them. There are a raft of existing scholarship schemes, and not only are there commonwealth scholarships for education, but universities have their own scholarship programs and so on. Scholarships are not the silver bullet here.

As I said earlier, cost is one factor for students who have got to that point of considering higher education, and scholarships are essential for some students, but they are not going to dramatically shift participation rates. Articulation between VET and higher education is another significant way of tackling this problem, and of course many universities have programs of this kind and, related to that, recruitment of mature-age students. I think we have to realise that not all people are going to come to higher education through the normal conventional linear pathway.

**The CHAIR** — Let us move on to other questions at that point.

**Mr HALL** — Thanks, Richard, for your presentation. I appreciate your views. I am going to ask a simple question, first of all, just to set you a context. We all know that there are differences in participation rates and completion rates and the like. Why is it important that we as a committee come up and make recommendations to try and address those differences?

**Prof. JAMES** — Why does equity matter?

**Mr HALL** — Yes, in your view?

**The CHAIR** — It is a simple question.

**Prof. JAMES** — The usual argument is one of fairness and social justice — that individuals who would benefit from higher education should have equal opportunities to go to higher education, and I think that in itself is a sound argument. The problem is how do you define individuals who would benefit from higher education, because the results that we see at year 12 are an artefact of a whole range of social, community, family skill factors that have influenced a young person's progression.

Nevertheless there is an individual social justice argument that I think is profound and we should not ignore, but I also think, and I strongly believe, there is a community development argument that we do not talk enough about — and by 'community development' I mean that the more young people you get into higher education, the more graduates you get in communities, the more those communities develop. And that is obviously true of indigenous communities, but it is also true of urban communities and rural communities. It might sound idealistic, but I still believe that there is a community development argument that goes beyond individual social justice.

There are more peripheral arguments as well about the importance of the social mix of the university population. The argument would be, and I believe it, that a diverse social mix on campus is educationally valuable for the students while studying. I have to say — and my colleagues from RMIT cannot listen to this — it is one of the things that concerns many of us about the University of Melbourne, that it is in some ways socially narrow as a university, and we have worked hard to try to change that.

**Mr HALL** — Thanks for that. I would perhaps suggest to you that there are other practical reasons, equally, why it is important that we address those differences — for example, I have heard that it is nine times more likely that a country student who studies a profession will come back and practise that profession in country Victoria. With regard to the socioeconomic levels that you were speaking about, higher education graduates improve socioeconomic levels. In your mind are they also equally important reasons?

**Prof. JAMES** — Of course. I am not an economist. I did not go down the argument of skill shortages and all of these sorts of things. Broadly speaking, as a nation we need more people doing higher education. There is a national development argument as well. But the national development argument is to do with overall rates of

participation in higher education as well as issues of overrepresented and underrepresented groups. I tackled your question more from the point of view of imbalances.

**Mr HALL** — It just helps to have your views on the record. Thank you.

**The CHAIR** — I am not sure whether you were leading the witness at one point there.

**Mr HALL** — You can encourage people to say what you think they need to say.

**The CHAIR** — Indeed.

**Mr DIXON** — I do not know if you have any idea, but what is the percentage of students at Melbourne, for example, who are on scholarships? I know there are various sources of these scholarships, not just university ones, and would it be true to say that students who have got scholarships have a higher completion rate than average?

**Prof. JAMES** — Are you talking about the University of Melbourne?

**Mr DIXON** — Yes.

**Prof. JAMES** — I do not know the percentages. In fact I do not know the answer to either of those questions. My understanding is that I do not think there are large differentials in success and retention between students who have got scholarships and students who do not. I am not sure.

**Mr HERBERT** — On what universities can do, is it the case that in terms of funding it is dearer for a university to provide undergraduate education out in the country at a rural campus than it is on a city campus?

**Prof. JAMES** — That is a very good question that I do not think I can answer in detail without giving you a potentially simplistic answer.

**Mr HERBERT** — I have probably heard that before, and I might be wrong, but I am just trying to work out whether there is a structural issue, given the hard times universities have had and which will undoubtedly continue — for money — that there is not a structural incentive for them to actually have more urban rather than more rural delivery.

**Prof. JAMES** — This is a question that you would be best off asking the universities that have sizeable rural campuses. It makes sense, because universities, particularly for undergraduate education, operate on benefits of scale, so that large undergraduate cohorts that can be serviced through one-stop student service outlets and things of this kind create economies of scale that you cannot get in rural campuses. I am not expert on the financial side of this, but I know the difficulties that my institution has in providing comparable levels of services and teaching support for our existing smaller, rural campuses, and this is an ongoing issue for us. I am not too sure whether institutions like La Trobe have got that sort of, with their Bendigo campus and so on. I am not sure.

**Mr HERBERT** — Given Melbourne's new model of much fewer generalist undergraduate courses, should that not make it easier for Melbourne or other universities who take up that option to offer undergraduate courses in country settings, because they do not have to offer such a broad range of undergraduate courses? Presumably you could offer more generalist undergraduate courses in rural and regional Victoria, and then people could come to Melbourne for the specialist — —

**Prof. JAMES** — In principle, yes. Steve, I get the impression that underlying your question, I think, unless I am mistaken, is the assumption that provision of more programs and courses in rural Victoria will help deal with the underrepresentation of rural Victorians. Is that underpinning it, because I think there are question marks against that assumption on the basis of the data.

**Mr HERBERT** — Yes, I understand that.

**Prof. JAMES** — Because many of the studies in Australia have shown that young people in rural areas want to leave their rural areas.

**Mr HERBERT** — I was thinking that more would help the status. One of the great criticisms we have around the university traps is that country campuses are just for teacher training, they are very narrow and limited and are not afforded the status of a university course, whereas if you are offering similar sorts of opportunities in terms of the breadth of undergraduate courses, and then you come to Melbourne, you might improve that status.

**The CHAIR** — As a stepping stone.

**Prof. JAMES** — Yes, and for some students that will work, but there is also a kind of ‘bright lights’ effect to do with cities and perceptions of big universities and sandstone and all of the sort of connotations — —

**Mr HERBERT** — Yes, of course.

**Mr HALL** — Richard, you spoke about economic barriers probably not being as significant as aspirational or achievement levels. Do you have a view on whether the economic barriers actually impact on aspirational levels?

**Prof. JAMES** — It is really difficult to research this issue, because when you research young people in years 10, 11 and 12 about their aspirations you tend to hear espoused reasons for their decisions rather than genuine underpinning reasons. For many young people it is very easy to espouse that the cost of higher education is a deterrent when in fact there are other underlying reasons which are less socially acceptable to talk about, to do with fear of leaving home, fear of going to a large university, fear of failure at university, concern that their school grades are not high enough. You can imagine those sorts of things which young people are likely to tell you. So when you research this issue you tend to get students saying that cost is a factor, and rural students are more likely to say that and students from lower socioeconomic status backgrounds are more likely to say it. But the extent to which it is the real reason is difficult to unpack from all of that.

**Mr HALL** — The other question I was going to ask you about was differences in participation rate in higher education between government and non-government school students — that is, those taking the direct entry path to higher ed. Do you see that as simply a reflection of what you described as a socioeconomic level difference between students who participate in higher ed.?

**Prof. JAMES** — Yes. What you have got are intersecting family factors, community factors and school factors that go into shaping a young person’s achievement at school, their aspirations and all those kinds of things, and we know that most of the effects come from family in the first instance. That is not to say that broader community and school factors are not important. They are important. But the polarisation that we see in Victoria at the moment with regard to access to university between government and private schools is really an artefact. It is not an artefact of the achievement of the schools, it is an artefact of the families that are sending their children to those schools, in the main part. I am obviously operating at a very broad level of generalisation here.

What gets me worked up about this is when we read that some government schools are underperforming. We just have to stop using that expression. I have no doubt that there are some government schools that are underperforming, and there may well be private schools that are underperforming, but you cannot judge a school’s performance merely on its student achievement because it is to do with the families and the backgrounds of the kids that are there.

**The CHAIR** — Are you aware of some research or some actions that have been taken either interstate or potentially overseas that show some successful activities in this area, in terms of research but more particularly in terms of getting people into tertiary education from some of those disadvantaged groups?

**Prof. JAMES** — One I have already mentioned is that when you work with schools in early-to-middle secondary you can show discernible effects in the progression on to higher education, and there has been a lot of good work in the UK in that area. But as I said earlier, that work is prohibitively costly, as you can imagine. Sorry, when universities work with schools to raise aspirations, it does work. In many ways schools are inward-looking, and children frame their ambitions and aspirations within the confines of that environment. They need injection from outside.

**The CHAIR** — What is the nature of this work that has been done? We are aware of course that some universities are going out there and spruiking more or less what is happening at universities and so on, hoping that

people will get a better understanding of what their opportunities are, but this is more detailed and they are actually working with teachers as well as students?

**Prof. JAMES** — Yes. I am sorry, I should have been clear about this. This is not universities marketing themselves; it is not universities trying to recruit students; it is universities going into schools and working on educational programs with the teachers where students get to see what academics are like and get to see what goes on in universities. They get to see research and they get a broader idea of what it is to go on to higher education than they would otherwise have.

The reason it is costly is that you have got to send university professors out into schools — those that are the sort that you can send into schools, I might say. It is time-intensive from a university point of view, and it does not necessarily have direct pay-offs for that individual university. If the University of Melbourne puts its resources into working in year 9 or year 10 with underrepresented schools in the region there is no guarantee that there will be a direct pay-off for the University of Melbourne, so it is done out of social altruism of some kind.

The other thing that works is freeing up ENTER and admitting students through alternative pathways. I would say that most Victorian universities would have examples of programs of some kind where teacher recommendations or other forms of achievement are recognised for university entry. But the problem about those at the moment is that they kind of operate on the margins and on the periphery of higher education because the main game is still built around the idea of merit, as measured in the ENTER score.

A third group of programs that absolutely and definitely work are programs to do with mature-age entry. One of the best of these in Australia is at the University of Newcastle. It is their foundation program, and it is by far the most thriving program in Australia with regard to bringing people who have had limited educational opportunities school back into university and building their confidence and skills to go on to higher education. The data from the Newcastle foundation program is pretty impressive in terms of the number of people they deal with, the number of people they prepare and equip for higher education and the eventual career paths of those people. Newcastle has tackled that in a big way, largely because the University of Newcastle operates in the somewhat educationally, socially and economically disadvantaged belt, so there are lots of people who fit the bill for them.

**The CHAIR** — The last question I would have is the sorts of things that would hope our inquiry might come up with in terms of some of its proposals. Have you a view about what you would hope we could put in our report?

**Prof. JAMES** — Yes. I think the first thing goes back to my little aside before: depicting this in terms of geographical difference really is dodging what the issue is here, it seems to me. It is about social class differences, and I think we need to confront that. That is the first thing.

I think if the emphasis was on how do we improve school achievement in these areas, that would suit me, because I think that is what fundamentally it is about. If there is an emphasis given to the need for new forms of collaboration and partnership that cross educational sectors, I think that would be valuable as well.

**Mr HALL** — Richard, I was just going to pick up one of the points you were making before about underlying reasons why kids do not participate in higher education related to aspiration, confidence, social factors about people feeling insecure and moving away from home. It was suggested to us last week by the Country Education Project people who presented to the committee that there is, though, somewhat of a progression from rural and remote school education to a regional centre and then to a capital city. They gave an example from Maffra Secondary College where the majority of higher education participants actually moved to Monash, Churchill, compared with those who actually move to Melbourne. Is that not a sound reason then for universities to perhaps to extend first-year degree programs to, say, some of our TAFE institutes, et cetera, where kids from rural and remote areas therefore would feel more comfortable going to a local TAFE college as an initial step before moving on and completing higher education degrees. Does Melbourne University have any of those sorts of affiliated programs with any of our institutes?

**Prof. JAMES** — I do not know that we do. If we did, we do not have many. I think there are a range of strategies to do with the relationship between higher education and VET and the relationship between universities and TAFE to do with broadening access. Those strategies will take multiple forms, including the one that you have referred to, which is the possibility of associate degrees or first-year conducted at a TAFE college and transition to university. I think there are a raft of possibilities there.

There are also possibilities around sandwiching study and work. There are some very interesting example going on in Queensland, where places like Griffith University are working very closely with the employers to encourage students who are attracted by the thought of earning money to be working and studying at the same time. In some ways we have to loosen up our thinking and be more creative about the relationships between higher education, school, TAFE and work. I know that is a simple way of putting it, but it is in those areas that we will create breakthroughs. If we keep thinking in the same way about this problem, we are not going to make much progress.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you very much, Richard.

**Prof. JAMES** — Thank you. Good luck.

**Witness withdrew.**



# CORRECTED VERSION

## EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

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

Melbourne — 3 March 2008

#### Members

Mr M. Dixon	Mr S. Herbert
Mr N. Elasmarr	Mr G. Howard
Mr P. Hall	Mr N. Kotsiras
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#### Witness

Professor R. Larkins, chair, Universities Australia; and Vice-Chancellor and President, Monash University.

**The CHAIR** — I welcome Professor Richard Larkins from Universities Australia who is also Vice-Chancellor of Monash University but I presume you are speaking more with the hat of the broader, united Australian universities?

**Prof. LARKINS** — Yes, I will start that way and then I will speak also about a study done by the Victorian Vice-Chancellors Committee when I was chair over the last two years, and then I will also, if you think it is appropriate, just say a little bit about some of the specific issues and ways in which Monash is trying to address it just as a case study, I guess.

**The CHAIR** — Okay. You are aware obviously we are an all-party committee and that the information you share with us today is covered under parliamentary privilege. We welcome your contribution and obviously we will have some questions to follow on from that.

**Prof. LARKINS** — And I believe you have just heard from Richard James?

**The CHAIR** — Correct.

**Prof. LARKINS** — Right. Some of what I say will probably overlap with some things that he referred to given that he is doing a study for Universities Australia relating to this and I suspect he spoke to you about that. Thank you very much on behalf of Universities Australia and my own university, Monash University, for taking an interest in this area. We think it is a very important area and one that I value the opportunity to discuss with you.

First, just a few words from the perspective of Universities Australia. We recognise that there is an issue about differential admission to the university sector of students with a rural and remote background. That applies particularly to students with an indigenous background from rural and remote communities but also to other students as well. Universities Australia and its predecessor, AVCC, have been involved in two studies of student poverty, student financial situation, the most recent being published last year, in 2007.

That identified that there were issues for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds in general but specifically also rural and remote backgrounds. We decided that a particular follow-up that we would wish to do would be to examine the access of students from socially disadvantaged and financially disadvantaged backgrounds to university, and one of the subtexts of that was specifically rural and remote students because that group had been identified.

We are trying to see and examine some of the things that you have in your terms of reference: why it is that students from low socioeconomic backgrounds have a lower access rate to universities and what can be done to address it?

I think one of the distressing things for us is that universities have reported on equity markers for years and have looked at the percentage of students from the lowest socioeconomic quartile, but despite a whole range of initiatives that has just not changed. We stay at about 12 or 13 per cent of that lowest quartile as the representation within the total university community. It is just a flat line. So it is something that has to be addressed.

If you look at the Group of Eight universities as the ones with tougher entry standards, if you would like to think of it in this way, the trend is actually in the negative direction despite, again, a lot of initiatives and I think earnest attempts by those universities to do something about it.

The study by Universities Australia is to specifically examine initiatives that can be taken as well as the particular problems within Australia, and the initial phase of that study idea has been contracted to the Centre for the Study of Higher Education is a literature survey where approaches taken in other countries and their applicability to Australia are being evaluated.

One of the big issues in all of this is the confounding of the data by local government areas and postcodes and not quite knowing how to get a real handle on the numbers of students that we are talking about if we talk about either socioeconomic disadvantage, which is often identified according to postcode and often made quite misleading because some universities which are located in areas with postcodes which are considered to represent low socioeconomic areas have students who live around those areas and are defined in that way even if they have had an original background from a completely different area. So there are problems with the data, but quite apart from that I do not think there is any question of underrepresentation from students in rural and remote areas.

A lot of the rest of what I will say will be just surmising from our own experience and a demonstration of some ways we try to cope with it. Monash University is unusual in the Group of Eight universities — the universities that do most of the research in Australia — because it does have a multiple campus structure including a regional campus in Gippsland as well as two outer suburban campuses, and we are able to look at the situation in comparative terms there and try a number of initiatives specifically to increase the access rate.

The sorts of things that we are doing there include, for example, having a diploma of tertiary studies as not quite a foundation year but a transition year where there is a lot more support given to the students. The students do six out of eight of the units from a normal first year plus two specific units which help them to adjust to university life and learning, and then they transition essentially into the second year of the course if they are successful at a certain level in that diploma of tertiary studies.

That has been a successful transition mechanism that has allowed students who, from a previous experience, have ENTER scores that would be associated with a low success rate and therefore would not have gained entry to get in and do pretty well at Monash University and come out with a Monash degree. Another program we have is using alternative entry requirements over and above ENTER.

We have trials of two different entry mechanisms that have been tried at our Berwick campus — not quite a rural area, but an outer urban area — where we have the same sorts of problems. We are also using our Monash College program, which was designed originally for international students, where there is a two-year transition from year 11 into the second year of university with a highly supported program that is being used increasingly for domestic students, again as a pathway program. So there are a variety of different techniques which are being evaluated.

The final study I would like to refer to is one from the Victorian Vice-Chancellors Committee which looked at the economic and social contribution of Victoria's regional and outer metropolitan university campuses. We had work contracted by SGS to look at this, and they did look at the trends in the demographics and enrolment statistics for regional and outer metropolitan campuses, finding the differential that we all know about and attempting to isolate factors that relate to that.

They certainly found that retention rates in high school were substantially different, and they also found that a number of the students from rural environments specifically ignored regional campuses and went straight through to metropolitan campuses. I must say we were not too impressed by the study, but there is quite a lot of information there of variable quality, of one sort or another, which, again, I would be very pleased to share with the committee, if you wish to see that.

I think that is most of the background opening statement I would like to make, but I am very happy to answer any queries either from the viewpoint of Universities Australia or from my own experience at Monash University.

**Mr KOTSIRAS** — In terms of the participation rate from geographical regions, are you aware how other countries or states compare with Victoria?

**Prof. LARKINS** — I cannot give absolute comparative data, but it is a problem that is recognised in all geographically dispersed countries, so it is not something that is at all unique.

**Mr KOTSIRAS** — Are you aware of any programs that other countries are doing?

**Prof. LARKINS** — No programs over and above entry pathways and giving discounts for rural location and ENTER scores, as we do and other universities do. I am not aware of other additional factors apart from that.

**The CHAIR** — If we look at the issues of other opportunities for students to get into uni rather than looking at the ENTER score, at Monash what percentage would come in other than via the ENTER score?

**Prof. LARKINS** — At our Gippsland campus, over 50 per cent. One other initiative that I forgot to mention, which is really important from our viewpoint looking into the future, is to form partnerships with schools both through having Monash University staff and students go to those schools and have mentoring programs with the schools — and we have programs around each of our campuses, apart from Clayton, which do that, including Gippsland — and in addition to that, as another strategy, to actually bring the final years of school into an education precinct co-located with the university. That is happening at Gippsland with the Gippsland education precinct. The

final years of Kurnai secondary college are actually undertaken co-located with Monash University and with the Gippsland Institute of TAFE.

Having TAFE colleges and secondary schools co-located with the university allows a much more seamless passage between them, so those articulation pathways are extremely important. That is not to say that all students going to TAFE should aspire to go to university, because that is obviously inappropriate and would not give the appropriate skills profile that we need. But there should be opportunities for students who have gone first to TAFE and would like to go to university to articulate with university. That is obviously something that most universities are working on, and I think through the co-location at Gippsland it is really working quite well and going to work much better. Monash certainly has the highest rate of articulation with TAFE of any of the Group of Eight universities, although obviously with dual sector, universities do better than that.

**The CHAIR** — So what is preventing you from extending that concept, or have you considered extending it at any of those levels?

**Prof. LARKINS** — Absolutely, we are extending it. At Clayton we are starting the John Monash Science School in conjunction with the education department, again to get students of ability who may not previously have contemplated going to university in a university environment at an early stage. We are also in discussion with the state government at the moment about a high school at the Berwick campus. That is very close to Chisholm TAFE as well, as is Peninsula, and we have articulation occurring at each of those.

**The CHAIR** — Sorry, just going on, putting your Universities Australia hat on — —

**Prof. LARKINS** — Sorry to be switching.

**The CHAIR** — Has there been consideration of developing further on alternatives from looking at the ENTER as the main measure by which students are selected?

**Prof. LARKINS** — I think that all our universities would have pathways apart from that. In some disciplines those pathways are very well developed, such as in the health sciences where ENTER is one component only and a test called UMAT, the undergraduate medical and allied health admissions test is used, which is meant to assess personal qualities and logic, problem-solving and so on, and then interview is used as well. That allows you to spread out the ENTER scores, and students from a rural background get special loading there.

Graduate entry to places like medical school or law school also provide opportunities for students who would not have got straight in, mature-age entry into university courses is used widely anyway, particularly in rural environments, and articulation pathways with TAFE are used widely as well. I think there tends to be an overemphasis on ENTER in evaluation of what happens, and certainly I think universities have tried to move away from that as too much of a predictor of what is likely to happen.

**Mr DIXON** — That 13 per cent flat line you were talking about, is that an average across Australia? How does each of the states compare?

**Prof. LARKINS** — It is a bit lumpy, and I cannot give differentials across states, but there is not a huge difference. There is still a gross underrepresentation everywhere. I think where it is least is in Tasmania, where the supply of university places in relation to students is greatest, and it is less competitive to gain entry.

**Mr DIXON** — A more compact state, would that have something to do with it too?

**Prof. LARKINS** — It may be because it is more compact, but I think it has just done so well through political leverage over the years that it benefits from that.

**Mr HALL** — I want to ask you, first of all, how important are regional campuses in addressing the issue of differences in participation rates for rural and remote students?

**Prof. LARKINS** — It is a difficult thing to really get totally to terms with. Intuitively one would say they are very important. In fact there is just not absolute evidence to say that. If you had the same number of places in a metropolitan area that are currently available in a regional area and had admission programs that were favourable, it would compensate to a significant extent for moving them out of regional locations, but there is certainly a subgroup for which a regional location of a campus is very important.

These are often mature-age students and often part-time students who are continuing to live in their rural environments and support their families and would only have the opportunity of going to university through a regional campus or through off-campus learning, which I still think is a suboptimal way to get a full, undergraduate at least, student experience.

So the answer is that they have a role. The total availability of places is probably more significant, together with specific programs that encourage and enable entry for students who perhaps have not done so well academically but have the ability to do well.

**Mr HALL** — Do you find — and you might not have this statistic at your finger tip — in the profile of students, say at Churchill, are they predominantly regional country students, and what percentage of those would be from Gippsland?

**Prof. LARKINS** — That type of information is contained in here. The answer is that there is a much higher percentage of students from rural and regional backgrounds, including students local to that area, but it is not exclusively so. With the graduate entry medical school starting there, the favouritism has been shown in the selection process for students from a rural background, but still students will try to get into medicine from anywhere, and it is certainly not exclusively so. But there is no question that there is a higher percentage overall of students with a rural background at our Gippsland Churchill campus than there would be at any other campuses.

**Mr HALL** — Is it possible for universities to get around antidiscrimination laws et cetera, to provide a favourable weighting for rural and remote students to attend universities?

**Prof. LARKINS** — The way we regard it is that discrimination of any form is unacceptable, except in situations where it is a clearly expressed, explicit bias towards a previously disadvantaged group. We do get around it by making that our policy and specifically encouraging that, just as we do for indigenous students.

**Mr HERBERT** — Richard, given the lack of progress, really, on extending the 13 per cent, or the number of students from rural and regional areas, is it time to get a bit hard edged on this question? Do Monash or other universities have targets in place in terms of their student cohort? Are their targets negotiated with the commonwealth as part of the funding process?

**Prof. LARKINS** — For students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, there is some funding associated with that and for indigenous students and students with disabilities, and I think the university is really trying to do things, but I think the biggest problem really is retention to year 12 and the wish and commitment of a student to go on. The reality is that students who have come from a disadvantaged socioeconomic background do not have the same ambitions to go to university and that is why the co-location scheme is something we are trying to do to actually encourage it.

**Mr HERBERT** — But it is very small, is it not?

**Prof. LARKINS** — Yes. It is not as if the students who want to come are being turned away. The students are really not applying in the first place or have not finished year 12 to qualify. I think all of us have equity targets and report annually to council and in our annual reports and so on, so we are trying to do better, but the awareness in the community of the opportunities that come from a university education are not there, and even from completing high school.

I think it is something that goes back a bit further than what we do at the entry point and that is why we have the Schools Access Monash program, and Melbourne has a similar program, reaching into the high schools to try to get the awareness of people of this possibility and the transformational effect that this could have on their lives.

Of course we have got shortages in many areas and I think the first task is to get more students completing high school or going into TAFE technical training, or universities, rather than having such a high percentage still not gaining any skills, which are in surfeit, and we have an undersupply right across the skills spectrum.

**Mr HERBERT** — Is that publicly available information, about what targets the universities have and how they have met them?

**Prof. LARKINS** — No, they are set internally.

**Mr HERBERT** — Is there any publicly available information about the targets in terms of the socioeconomic rule that universities have, and how they perform against them?

**Prof. LARKINS** — Not that I know of. The institutional assessment framework reports that come from the commonwealth go through the equity statistics and so on, but not so much in relation to targets. They show how well universities are performing against averages.

**Mr HERBERT** — So the commonwealth will have that data?

**Prof. LARKINS** — Through the commonwealth, yes. The commonwealth collects data like that, so I think the best would be through what used to be DEST (Department of Education, Science and Training) but the university sector is part of DEEWR (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations) now. They do have statistics that they collect. We have visits — it used to be every year, it is now every second year — from DEST/DEEWR to go through all our reporting and targets. It is not a specific numerical target but there is funding associated with lower socioeconomic groupings.

**Mr HERBERT** — Do universities set equity targets over and above the funding?

**Prof. LARKINS** — We have recordings, and we benchmark against other universities, rather than having a specific numerical target but that target would be the best three in the Group of Eight; and we are. We would like the numbers to be up and we are doing everything we can to get them up, but we do not have a specific percentage target over and above being in the top three in the Group of Eight.

**Mr HERBERT** — I appreciate that, because if the Group of Eight are not doing too well, the benchmarking is not much good, is it?

**Prof. LARKINS** — They are not doing too well, I agree with that, I am just telling you the specific things, and we do measure the percentage and try to show it to be improving as well, but we do not have a specific numerical target that we have set or is imposed on us.

**Mr ELASMAR** — With selected students in round 1 and round 2, does it make any difference where they have completed their high school? Does the school name make any difference?

**Prof. LARKINS** — Whether they have completed?

**Mr ELASMAR** — Where they have completed.

**Prof. LARKINS** — Yes, if they have got a rural background, they get a loading; and if they have got a socioeconomic disadvantage, they get a loading. The way Monash does it is to up their ENTER scores by a certain amount for those two parameters.

**Mr DIXON** — What specific outcomes would you like to see out of this inquiry that we are doing?

**Prof. LARKINS** — That is interesting. I think we would like to see a lot of work going into the secondary school system to encourage students who would normally drop out, to be retained through that system. A lot of, perhaps, programs specifically funded to encourage the universities to do what we do in our pilot programs, to reach down to the schools by having mentoring and support programs entering into the schools and disadvantaged areas.

Although I said to Peter, that the effect is hard to quantitate, I think having high-quality viable university campuses of a critical size and with adequate support — that is support for student services and so on in regional areas — is a positive thing. And I think funding specific schemes that allow co-location of TAFE colleges and high schools in educational precincts; so a sharing of resources. And also, just an awareness that there can be that transition. I guess those would be the things off the top of my head that I would see as most useful, although I am, of course, waiting to see the outcome of the Universities Australia study, and I hope that there will be some innovative suggestions coming from that that might also be possible to feed into this process as well.

**The CHAIR** — When does that come out?

**Prof. LARKINS** — The first report, I think is some time about mid-year. Did Richard James tell you when he had to report?

**The CHAIR** — No.

**Prof. LARKINS** — No. We commissioned it in October 2007. No, sorry it is not in here.

**The CHAIR** — We can follow that up later. Presumably cost and funding is an issue that prevents you going down this path at a faster rate?

**Prof. LARKINS** — It is also a matter of having the students that will do well at university, so it is no good just getting students into university if they do not do well. It is a matter of really getting the support for the students in the transition, as strong as it can be, so that is where we have been putting a lot of attention to make sure that the progression and the success rate is satisfactory.

We could go down to an ENTER score of 40 and get more students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds but we would not be doing them a service, we would not be doing all the other students at Monash a service or the graduates, or the international worth of Monash degrees. We would probably destroy our international student market, which is Victoria's greatest export industry.

**Mr HERBERT** — What do you go down to?

**Prof. LARKINS** — We go down for direct entry to 70, allowing for the fact that students less than that who have points for socioeconomic disadvantage to push them up.

**Mr HERBERT** — So 65, that sort of — —

**Prof. LARKINS** — Sixty-five could get in with the 5 per cent loading that they get for that, but we go down as low as 50 into some of the pathway programs, that they have to pass that satisfactorily before they will get into Monash definitively.

**Mr HERBERT** — So that is an associate diploma? That sort of thing, is it?

**Prof. LARKINS** — No; they get a diploma of tertiary studies, so it is not meant to be an end in its own right, but they do go away with that.

**Mr HERBERT** — Kids that have left school and then come on are the issue.

**Prof. LARKINS** — There are kids who have left school with lower ENTERs who do have aspirations and who have demonstrated a background of disadvantage itself, and that has been a successful program, particularly feeding into education and nursing faculties.

**Mr HERBERT** — How many people?

**Prof. LARKINS** — They have in the program this year, from memory, something like 150 or so, and it is building up and we are extending that to Leongatha as well, and possibly to Bairnsdale.

**Mr HALL** — Richard, does Monash expect to see an increase in participation rates in higher education from Kurnai College students as a result of the education precinct?

**Prof. LARKINS** — Yes; we are hoping to.

**Mr HALL** — It is a bit early. It has only been open for a full year.

**Prof. LARKINS** — It has only been open for a full year, but it is certainly part of the rationale for it, absolutely.

**Mr HALL** — I chaired the original committee that looked to establish it.

**Prof. LARKINS** — It was slow in evolution; the plan has been there ever since I started at Monash, but it now is happening, and I think it will be successful. The other thing that has made a big difference is having the

graduate-entry medical school there, which has meant that people who may never have thought they had a chance of getting into medicine go into undergraduate courses at Monash Gippsland in the hope of being able to transfer later.

Having it sit there above it as a graduate thing, people suddenly can get motivated towards it, whereas they may not have been motivated to go to university at all, and certainly not in Churchill. That campus has turned around very substantially so that it is 100 students over the enrolment target this year for the campus. It is financially break even, which is pretty unusual for university regional campuses, and it has got a really positive feeling around it, so a number of things have happened which have included the education precinct, but there is a bit of critical mass as well the graduate-entry medical schools and the arrangements with international universities around cohort programs.

By devolving the budget to the campus they have been able to be creative about some of the things they have done. I think the model of having a regional campus in an internationally recognised university is a better model for regional universities than setting up something stand-alone in a region that does not get a critical mass, and it becomes more attractive for students to get a Monash degree than to get a Gippsland university degree, for example.

**Mr HALL** — What cost imposts are imposed upon universities by providing regional campuses and programs at regional campuses?

**Prof. LARKINS** — The story here is that — and my colleagues would say, and have been making applications — they are a substantial cost impost. I think it is a scale issue more than a regional location issue. With 3000 students-plus they are financially okay. Smaller regional campuses are very difficult to make financially viable, because to have a reasonable range of courses with small numbers of students means you have a student–staff ratio that becomes unviable, so it is very difficult for some of the smaller campuses of universities, such as La Trobe and Deakin and so on, to be financially viable. The Gippsland campus now is viable. I think three or four years ago it was losing \$6 million a year; it is now just about break even.

**Mr HALL** — What potential is there for more universities around Australia to deliver first-year degree programs from other educational institutions, like TAFE institutes et cetera?

**Prof. LARKINS** — The overlap between universities and TAFEs is becoming quite broad, as you know, so there is opportunity for that degree of cooperation. There are sectoral issues that make it a little bit complex to get that type of arrangement, but they could certainly extend the idea of TAFE articulation programs being more targeted and directed, so it is certainly a possibility.

**Mr HALL** — RMIT, for example, runs a couple of first-year degree programs out of East Gippsland Institute of TAFE.

**Prof. LARKINS** — Yes; they are trying to hand those over to us, in fact.

**Mr HALL** — Monash used to have a presence down there, yes. But is that possible and can that work? Can that improve access to higher education for many regional students?

**Prof. LARKINS** — Yes, I think it can. I think that is the sort of pathway-program-type mechanism which I think is a really important strategy to address the issue and problem. It can be with TAFE or it can be with more purpose-built things, such as the ones we have got. We are trying to use them all.

**Mr HERBERT** — Do you provide a broad range of services, like at Churchill, for the extra numbers? I notice the Churchill pub shut about a year ago, and that used to be a great haunt of all the students there. I wonder whether you have put in resource — it is a serious question — into the broader student and non-academic life in —

**Prof. LARKINS** — The answer is yes. It was an entirely counterproductive move a couple of years ago to cut out the compulsory amenities fee. I call it ‘compulsory amenities fee’. It has nothing to do with VSU, because, as you know, it has been voluntary student unionism for over a decade. I just regard it as a tax that is like a local government tax that allows the experience of all students to be enhanced. It cut \$13.7 million out of the revenue stream for all of Monash.



We have put back \$8 million-worth of services. The \$8 million, otherwise would have been used to support education and research, but we regard it as absolutely fundamental that there are services preserved for students and experiences for students that are broader than the straight academic experience. We have worked with MUGSU, which is the Monash University Gippsland Student Union, and Daniel Jordan, who is a very strong-minded chief executive of that group to make sure the students there are well supported. We get good feedback from the students about their experience there. I am not quite sure about the way we are substituting for the closure of the bar. It was the pub that closed, was it?

**Mr HERBERT** — Yes.

**Prof. LARKINS** — I am not sure exactly what has happened about that, but the students do have a good time there, and we get positive feedback on it. I think it is fundamentally important.

**Mr HALL** — But you do sponsor the local footy club, though — the Churchill Football Club?

**Mr HERBERT** — Do they?

**Prof. LARKINS** — Yes.

**Mr HALL** — A lot of the students go there.

**Prof. LARKINS** — It is one of the areas of community engagement that is really important. You do not want the activity just to be confined to the campus. It has got to be reaching out. The Gippsland campus is terrific at that, and the acting pro vice-chancellor has done a great job of extending that, as had the previous pro vice-chancellor. The new person has been chosen because she has a commitment to that type of engagement, too.

The slightly negative answer I gave about the importance of regional campuses in affecting the student enrolment is not meant to be in any way negative about the importance of regional campuses for the regional economy, community and everything else. I think they are critical. I am deeply committed to a Gippsland Churchill campus and think it is a model for what can be achieved. Even my initial response to your question was a bit negative about them raising the possibility of university enrolment for students in the region as well. So if I gave anything like a negative answer to that, I have reconsidered it in my mind and would come back much more positively.

**Mr HALL** — The committee is going to Churchill in May of this year, so Daniel Jordan and others will impress upon my committee colleagues how important that campus is.

**Prof. LARKINS** — And it is a very difficult balance again — and nothing to do with Universities Australia now — just to get the balance right when you get a regional campus of a metropolitan university to have enough connection with the regional campus so that it gets all the benefit from being part of, in our case, Monash University, but at the same time sufficient autonomy that it can take all the advantages of a regional interaction.

If you get it right, it is a real win-win, and I am very proud, and one of the things I really like about Monash, as opposed to the other Group of Eight universities, is the really serious engagement with a regional campus in that way. I think it is working well. Thank you very much for your patience in hearing me. I am sorry I was a bit imprecise about a few of those statistics, but the best way to access them is through DEEWR.

**Mr HERBERT** — Yes, we will do that.

**Prof. LARKINS** — They collect information relentlessly from us and it would be good for once to put it to some useful purpose.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you very much.

**Committee adjourned.**