C O R R E C T E D V E R S I O N

EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the approaches to homework in Victorian schools

Melbourne — 29 April 2014

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Witnesses

Dr T. Meath, Principal,

Ms Y. Arnott, Director, Curriculum, and

Eadie, Karen, Michelle and Susan, year 11 students, MacRobertson Girls High School;

Ms S. Harrap, Assistant Principal, Nossal High School; and

Mr J. Ludowyke, Principal, and

Mr N. Fairlie, Year 12 Coordinator, Melbourne High School.

The CHAIR — Welcome, everybody. It is great to see everybody presenting here today. Our executive officer, Michael Baker, might have mentioned to you that, to accommodate the fact we have a number of people today, we thought we would spend some time with the five witnesses before us now and then invite the four students who have come along to join us today to sit at the table. We will have a little bit of a role reversal, but without further ado I warmly welcome you all.

We are at the public hearings of the Education and Training Committee and our inquiry into the approaches to homework in Victorian schools. Whilst you are here — and I extend these comments to the students in the public gallery — whatever you have to say is protected by parliamentary privilege, which means you can speak quite freely. However, that privilege does not extend to when you leave this environment. Members of the Hansard team will capture information, and a transcript will be made available to each school. You can have a look at that for typographical errors and so forth, and that typically involves about a two-week turnaround.

We are very happy about your coming together today. Thank you for coming in, and without further ado I invite Ms Yvette Arnott, in her role as director of curriculum at MacRobertson Girls High School, to lead off with any opening remarks, given the terms of reference.

Ms ARNOTT — I have a statement. I will read directly from it. At MacRob we have found that homework is most effective when it is used for extension and for students to conduct independent inquiry. Rather than being used to cover curriculum content not reached in class time, we believe homework is best spent incubating ideas and fleshing out concepts in a self-directed manner that is not often available during school time. Sophisticated and abstract ideas need time to develop outside the classroom, and homework is an ideal forum for students to consider and weigh up ideas creatively and synthesise new concepts. When homework works best it is student driven rather than prescribed uniformly by teachers. However, it is important that teachers give clear instructions to students who seek guidance, as not all students have the confidence about what is required and how they should proceed with their own classwork.

In our experience students achieve better results from homework when teachers are responsive to individual student needs and are therefore able to give them specific advice and guidance and suggest avenues for further inquiry. In the context of gifted education, which we are very much involved in at MacRob, the upper years of high school are significantly about giving students the study skills and intellectual curiosity to ready them for further study in a more independent environment such as tertiary education. Homework is a tool to build upon a student's study practices, research skills and depth in extended inquiry.

We have also found very particularly at MacRob that students travel long distances to come to and from school, because it is a selective entry school and not a local high school. That means students will often spend upwards of 2 hours per day just in travelling, so the expectation of several hours of homework can be highly demanding and sometimes can have detrimental effects on their health and wellbeing. Additionally, a lot of our students attend language-based schools and cultural schools as well as extra tutoring outside of school, so there are a lot of demands on their time, and that adds to the burden of homework for them and reduces the time they have to socialise and develop skills and relationships in other areas. In many ways we try to work with parents to reduce the hours of homework more than expand them. Not only do we believe firmly this is in the best interests of students academically, but we think it is also important for their health and wellbeing.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much. Now adding to those comments is Dr Toni Meath, who is the principal of MacRobertson Girls High School.

Dr MEATH — Additionally, we are looking at a student with their homework in volition — that is, creating the volition of the student to do their own study. If you can create that inner motivation, what does a curious learner do when they get home or on the way home? They are looking perhaps at other resources that add to the text they are studying or their work rather than busywork or more of the same. It can be practice and drill at home, but it is more about giving space and time for that curious mind to reflect on, ponder and work out what they have done at school under the expert guidance of their teacher. When they

get home that notion of scaffolded learning is about what can add to that knowledge and their greater understanding of it. We find that is where homework has its greatest strength.

The CHAIR — Ms Sue Harrap, I am inviting you to make some opening remarks as well. Ms Sue Harrap is the assistant principal of Nossal High School.

Ms HARRAP — We find it is necessary when students first enter Nossal at year 9 to be explicit with them and their parents about the difference between homework and study and encourage them to do both. However, in saying that, we also find it is necessary for us to be explicit with parents about limiting the number of hours that students spend on homework and study, because their parents are highly involved in promoting them to be successful in their educational endeavours and at times can put an overemphasis on the amount of work that they need to do at home. We find that we almost need to be the gatekeepers of our students' wellbeing in some instances.

The CHAIR — So you are managing parent expectations?

Ms HARRAP — Yes. We do that during the term, and we are very explicit about what we expect in the holidays as well, because many of our families see the holidays as being a time where students can catch up and get ahead and be ahead of the game in preparation for the next term. We are very explicit about limiting that to a set number of hours and very explicit with the teachers to ensure that they do not overload the students with tasks in the holidays, because, like at MacRob, a significant number of our students attend language school in relation to their cultural heritage predominantly, and they may spend upwards of 5 to 6 hours a week, predominantly on the weekends, at language school. Many students have multiple tutors and spend a number of hours a week at tuition. We find that rather than enforcing homework we are doing the opposite in many cases. There are some students who require scaffolding to complete homework, but they would be the minority in our case.

The CHAIR — This question could be answered by anybody here. Do you have a situation where you have to allow students a chance to recover from the pressures they are getting from many directions and where the school, more than in its interaction with the parents, has to find a means of providing extra support for the students?

Ms HARRAP — Nossal has incorporated into years 10 to 12 designated study time for all students, where they are not in particular curriculum streams. Year 10 has the greatest number of studies per week, compared to year 11 and year 12, and we do that to promote an adult learning environment, but we also do it to alleviate some of the pressures with travel, additional tuition and language school. The students respond very positively to that and work collaboratively and independently throughout the school.

The CHAIR — Welcome to Mr Jeremy Ludowyke, the principal of Melbourne High School. We invite some opening remarks from you.

Mr LUDOWYKE — Thank you. I might provide a context to our school, which apart from a couple of things would be equivalent or similar across the three schools represented here today. Melbourne High School is one of Victoria's four selective academic entry schools, and in our case we are a selective entry school for boys in years 9 to 12. Our students are selected through a government-administered entry test, and in our case our 1760 students hail from literally every postcode in the greater metropolitan area of Melbourne and also from an unusually diverse range of socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. Together with our sister school, MacRobertson Girls High School, we are also of course Victoria's oldest state secondary school, having been established in 1905. It is the aspiration and actual pathway for almost all of our students — and I say that collectively for the four schools — to proceed to university. Our students at Melbourne High represent the single largest cohort of intake to both Melbourne and Monash universities and have done so now for over 100 years.

As our students are academically highly able and also intently engaged with schooling, I feel our experience might provide a unique insight for the inquiry. Our own school's recommendation for the average minimum requirements for home study is for at least six nights a week: at year 9, 1½ hours; year 10, 2 hours; year 11, 2½ hours; and year 12, 3 hours. These recommended hours are for both set work

and for self-directed and extension study, and we encourage and assist students to establish regular homework routines. The amount and timing of homework being set by teachers is monitored by our student learning coordinators at each year level, and the school also offers study skills training for students to assist them to develop independence in learning competencies.

There are two aspects of homework which are relevant to the inquiry's terms of reference and which I thought would be useful to draw to the attention of the committee. The first is the potential of education technology to transform the concept of self-directed study and its connections to what happens at a school and in a classroom. I will use an example of this, a senior chemistry class, to illustrate what we are beginning to see. For example, approximately two weeks prior to the introduction of a new unit of study in chemistry a teacher would advise the students that they have posted a podcast or some form of online materials containing the core content material of the new unit. Each student would be expected to then download this and become familiar with the content.

Most of our students, as you heard, have travel times of over an hour to and from school, and many report using that downtime to listen to or view such online material. Teachers report that shifting of the content heavy learning can free up at least half of the required teaching time for a unit of work and therefore free up the capacity to go in depth and explore areas which otherwise they would love to do but simply cannot entertain in the time frame.

Teachers also work with students to design, for example, apps, if you know that term, or applications, that enable them to collaborate and share — in this case it could be lab experiment data in real time — again freeing up both classroom and home study time for a higher level of teaching and learning. Our experience, therefore, suggests that educational technology is beginning to radically reshape the old boundaries between classroom and home study in ways that no doubt would be very important to the consideration of this inquiry.

The second aspect relevant to this inquiry we would like to emphasise is the rapid growth of private tutoring, which you have heard a little about, and its impact upon both school programs and home study and, for that matter, the wellbeing of our students. In the past the predominant use of private tutors has tended to be where a deficit in a student's basic skill acquisition was apparent and one-to-one individual support to accommodate that may not have been able to be accessed through their school. This circumstance is unlikely to apply to any of our students; however, over the past 5 to 10 years we have noticed anecdotally a sharp rise in the number of our students employing private tutors and the level of this usage.

Two years ago I undertook a survey of our year 11 students and their use of private tutors. Over 60 per cent of students were paying for some amount of additional private tuition, which on average was between 2 or 3 hours per week. However, there was significant variation in that pattern, and in some instances students were undertaking over 10 hours of private tuition per week. This is in addition to the recommended hours of study that we would have in the school. While there was a heavier use of tutors in some cultural communities, tutors were being employed across the full spectrum of our very diverse community.

In practical terms this meant that many students were undertaking significantly more home study than that recommended by the school, but our concerns about home tuition do not stop there. Rather than assisting students to complete course work set by the school, we found that in many instances tutors were effectively setting students a parallel course of study which itself was then generating its own homework demands upon students beyond that set by the school. To accommodate this, students were undertaking more than double the number of recommended hours of home study. As an indication of how absurd this sort of arrangement can become, it is not uncommon now for our teachers to be approached by students who are seeking their assistance to complete the homework set by their tutors. Somehow we seem to have completely reversed the roles of what is going on here. Often this work bears absolutely no relation to the prescribed curriculum and may be in contradiction in some instances to the prescribed curriculum.

I am very troubled by the impact of this growth in the use of private tutors and would like to hand over to my colleague, Mr Nick Fairlie, to further comment. Nick is one of the school's most experienced student

learning coordinators, having served in the role both at year 9, which is our intake cohort, and currently at year 12. He is in an ideal position to comment on the effect of private tuition and homework more generally.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for that contribution, Mr Ludowyke. There are some startling revelations for us. I am thinking that we will be starting to look at vitamin D deprivation from the sorts of things you have outlined.

Mr LUDOWYKE — As an aside, quickly, to the question you raised earlier, one of the things that a number of us would report would be that students who are burning the midnight oil are arriving at school in no state to undertake a school day and in fact are often asleep in the morning on the desk because of the burning of the midnight oil that is going on at home.

The CHAIR — My goodness! Thank you very much for these contributions. It is certainly a very different world for our selective entry schools. Mr Fairlie, we are looking forward to your contribution.

Mr FAIRLIE — Our high-performing school strives to develop young minds capable of independent and robust critical thought. Melbourne High promotes the quest for academic excellence as a pursuit which is at once individual and cooperative. The infinitely rewarding intellectual struggle is inherently a personal one, but also one which is conducted within a supportive and attentive learning community. In my five years as year 9 coordinator and in my second year now as a year 12 coordinator I have witnessed the gradual undermining of this academic ethos by tutors paid by parents to act as an intermediary between student and school and often between student and the knowledge they seek.

Many students arrive at Melbourne High having been tutored extensively since primary school, often with the express purpose of achieving entry into a selective school. Success in the entrance exam then tends to have the effect of reinforcing the benefits of the tutoring, encouraging parents to continue or in many cases increase the amount of tutoring their child receives. These tutoring sessions nearly always run as entirely separate streams from the school's prescribed coursework. Rather than providing focused assistance in reinforcing the day's lessons, many tutors teach their own courses, often setting their own homework to be completed in addition to the homework set by the classroom teacher.

Many students are tutored in multiple subjects, which can mean 5 hours of tutoring a week, not to mention the time taken to complete the extra homework associated with these sessions. Because of the financial investment made by parents, students often feel their first loyalty is to their tutor and privilege this homework over that set by their teacher. The time spent on this extra work is time the school dearly wishes students would commit instead to their own wellbeing by exercising, socialising and relaxing. I regularly counsel year 12 students suffering from burnout as a result of this unnecessary extra work.

Those students who arrive at Melbourne High not being tutored soon realise that their peers are and remedy this perceived disadvantage by acquiring tutors themselves. Parents have reported to me that they feel they have let their children down by not getting tutors and were investing heavily in a tutoring program to catch up. One of the most insidious aspects of the tutoring phenomenon is the way tutors make themselves indispensable to families. The tutor has a financial interest in convincing a family that the student's progress is dependent on the tutor's intervention. We hear of tutors criticising the school, reinforcing their own importance and ensuring their ongoing employment.

'You can't do this without me' is a message which erodes a student's self-confidence and independence. This message also sets students and teachers in conflict, with teachers regularly reporting their frustration at the battle they feel they are having with an anonymous, unseen third party. Where a trained teacher sees themselves as mentor and nurturer of a student's intellect, very often tutors promote a different attitude to a student's own mind. Rather than supporting curiosity and celebrating intellectual struggle as the pathway to rigour, a tutor's brief is to provide answers, tips and shortcuts. The attraction of immediate, effort-free results is very hard for a student to resist, but the cost to the student is an ever-deepening reliance on a tutor whose financial interest is in seeing the student's independence and critical capacities decline.

Not all tutoring has a negative effect. Individual focused attention by a skilled educator on a student's specific areas of weakness can help a student enormously; it is the widespread issue of tutoring to excess which is undermining our school's effort to develop the minds of our students to their full potential.

The CHAIR — For the other schools, I am interested to know whether the strength of Mr Fairlie's contribution is something that in your experience you can relate to or perhaps share elements of.

Ms ARNOTT — Absolutely. At MacRob we also have a similar concern about tutoring. I know of incidents where students have received a mark for a year 12 SAC and their tutor has contacted the school to complain about the mark. Of course they have not seen all the work and they often do not know the context of how it is being marked, but they take an extreme interest and a pride in the idea that they have somehow helped a student achieve a particular mark, and often they do not quite know what they are trying to achieve.

Also I have personally had a student who wrote a rather extraordinary essay. It did not actually refer to the characters in the film we were studying; it referred a lot to a clown, and there was no clown in the film. I asked her, 'Where did the clown come from?'. She said, 'My tutor said there was a clown'. The tutor did not know the text at all and had completely convinced her to write about something else, and as a result her results plummeted until she let go of the tutor.

There is a big impact on the students, and they are encouraged to believe that the tutor is essential. I also know that there are a lot of students at MacRob who do feel disadvantaged if they do not have a tutor, if their parents cannot afford a tutor, and it becomes a financial pressure on a lot of parents who feel like they are letting their children down.

The CHAIR — What percentage, would you say, would there be across the three schools of people engaging tutors?

Dr MEATH — Probably 50 per cent, I would say.

Ms ARNOTT — In some subjects it would be higher.

Ms HARRAP — An equivalent amount.

Dr MEATH — If you look at current educational theory, it has actually had quite a shift in the last 20 years in the notion of a flipped classroom.

The CHAIR — Yes, we heard a splendid example of that.

Dr MEATH — Jeremy spoke of doing the groundwork on the way to school, and then the practical practitioner and the nitty-gritty of the learning in the classroom. Often we are finding that tutors do not understand this concept. So for them again it is, as we heard, giving answers, it is that practice and drill, whereas as we said at the beginning we are wanting to foster the curious mind, and we are finding that that is the mind that is going to go the distance in learning and have a love of learning for life and carry them forward in university as well. Yes, they do need to achieve a high ATAR to get them into what they want to get into, and our girls do find comfort in success. They want to know that they are on target, on task and on mark, and that they are in the safe hands of expert teachers who understand the Victorian curriculum and the Australian curriculum and are able to take them to that point.

The CHAIR — Dr Meath, are you implying that some tutors might have tutoring expertise but are not necessarily au fait with not only what the school's requirements are but just what is required within the Victorian education experience?

Dr MEATH — Absolutely. It is difficult to generalise because I am sure there are excellent tutors who do have a deep understanding of what the VCE requires, for example, and are up on educational theories, but there are many tutors who just say, 'You need to be formulaic, you need to do this, you need to do this

and that will get you through the hurdles', but as we are hearing, there is disparity in their understanding of what is actually happening.

Mr LUDOWYKE — It is probably worth considering that if you were to think of it in that way the tutoring industry is a completely unregulated industry. There is nothing to stop anyone putting up their shingle and saying they are a professional tutor. They may have no formal qualification in education whatsoever or no contemporary one. There is actually no regulation about who could act as a tutor.

The CHAIR — Are tutors available online as well, or are we looking at a large proportion of them being a physical presence at the elbow of the student and having actual contact?

Mr LUDOWYKE — Certainly in our experience most of it is face to face.

Mr BROOKS — Should tutors be regulated? That is the question, I suppose.

Mr LUDOWYKE — If they are a necessary evil — and I question whether they need to exist, certainly at the level of use and the type of use that we are experiencing — there would be, you would think, an absolute necessity to then look at some form of registration or regulation, because as I said who is going to attest to the bona fides or the knowledge base upon which that person is offering their services.

Dr MEATH — They are expensive. They are incredibly expensive.

Mr BROOKS — I was just going to ask: how much does a tutor charge?

Mr LUDOWYKE — Our sense of the market, so to speak, is that there is one level of tutoring which will often be university students, sometimes even secondary students a couple of years advanced, who are offering their services as a tutor. The students at the back may have a better idea of the working commercial rates.

Mr BROOKS — They are nodding.

Mr LUDOWYKE — What we are hearing is that it is around about $15-plus per hour at that level, but then you will have someone who is purporting to be, if I can use the term loosely, a professional tutor, and we have been hearing of people being charged $35 or $40.

Dr MEATH — I would say $60 to $70.

EADIE — I know someone who paid $120 an hour.

Ms HARRAP — Many of these are group sessions as well, so you may have upwards of 20, 25, 30 students in the one group being charged that amount of money and practising drill kind of work.

The CHAIR — Is there any evidence that there are poor practices? We have heard you speak about shortcuts, tips and so forth. Are students instilled with the importance of synthesising their own information and the dangers of subjecting themselves to plagiarism and all sorts of sites where you can get and download the answers?

Dr MEATH — One of the characteristics of our students is that they are rapid learners. Many of them are actually able to read a page, remember that page and repeat that page. That is in their skill set because it is a pattern recognition of what they are learning. So if the tutor is saying, 'You need to rote learn this and regurgitate this', they are able to do that because that is part of their skill set. They can do that. But to do that without a deep understanding, they will hit a wall. They will hit the ceiling, because they actually have to develop, as you said, that deep level of synthesis and be able to transfer knowledge from one area to the other to give that understanding so that they are successful at university. If they are just doing rote learning and memorising to pass the test, then in the first year of university when they are actually asked to engage in critical thinking and struggle with concepts, as I heard my colleague speak about, they hit that ceiling. It is really important in the earlier ages to develop that deep understanding and the wherefore and the why and 'How does this work?'. That is what we find at MacRob. As we said at the beginning, it is about

developing that curious mind, that volition — 'I want to really understand this. What will help me understand this better?' — and using our time in homework to do that.

The CHAIR — I must say, Dr Meath, between yourself and Ms Arnott it was interesting to hear some of the vocabulary you used across the board. We have heard very different vocabulary from other witnesses in terms of dealing with students with a higher intellect and a different drive.

Mrs MILLAR — I am interested in this concept of the effect that home tutors may have on the pathway into university. It was stated that most of your students have in common that they are seeking to enter a particular university, and that is their goal in coming to your schools. I am interested in your experiences or evidence around what impact there may be on students who are reliant on these home tutors as opposed to the traditional students who are just coming and doing the self-learning, with universities being entirely about developing your research skills and your research methodology for entirely self-based learning.

Mr LUDOWYKE — I could probably provide a better than anecdotal response to that, because we track and have a conversation with our graduates immediately when they finish school, at the end of their first year and at the end of their fifth year. Interestingly, the tutoring phenomenon does not seem to sustain into tertiary level. I think there is a perception, particularly from a parental point of view, that the endgame is gaining the place at university, and once that has been achieved it becomes 'Why would we be continuing to underpin this with this secondary provision?'. It tends to fade away at that point.

Our students then fairly consistently report that it is the self-efficacy and the self-direction that they have had developed by the school and not by the tutor that is immediately called upon. The degree to which they have developed strong independence of learning is the sustaining factor for them at university, and they then themselves begin to regard the tutoring as unhelpful and unuseful.

Ms HARRAP — I would reiterate those points, although we only have one year of history in terms of university entrance. Those students have told us that it is the use of study time at school and the development of study skills and independence that has set them up for an excellent transition into university, and they compare themselves positively to their peers at university.

Dr MEATH — Because that efficacy gives them great resilience — 'I don't know how to do this, I have no idea how to do this but I have the skills in myself and I'm confident in my ability to work it out. I don't know yet, but I can work it out. I know how to write an essay, I don't know how I'm going to write this essay but I have the efficacy to do that. I'm not relying on someone to tell me what to write in paragraph 1 and what to write in paragraph 2'.

Mrs MILLAR — I am also wondering whether perhaps there is a pathway whereby students who are heavily home tutored move into residential colleges where they also have that tutoring pattern continuing to happen for them. Have you noted any correlation between those things?

Mr LUDOWYKE — No, I do not think a lot of our students are moving into residential colleges.

Partially I think because of the socioeconomic diversity of our communities they are not strongly in evidence in residential colleges, although we are seeing a developing trend of them aspiring to attend universities interstate and overseas, and that would lead them back into a residential environment.

The CHAIR — I would be interested in an answer from anybody here in terms of what does a school do to communicate the importance of prioritising what the school has on offer and where they are enrolled, as against the engagement of tutors and, dare I say, even pointing out that there may be pitfalls to that?

Mr FAIRLIE — I could say that our year 9 handbook, which again is our entry year, contains a statement on tutoring, explaining why the school thinks it is a bad idea and discouraging parents from employing them. At the year 9 information night it is also explicitly addressed, and at the year 12 information night that message is repeated. It is a sensitive topic in talking with parents because they feel so deeply that they are doing the right thing by employing tutors, so to tackle them on that is very delicate.

They hold fast to that feeling that, 'Perhaps I can't offer much to my child by way of my own academic background, but what I can do is pay for a tutor. So don't take that away from me; that's the one thing I can do'.

The CHAIR — That is so understandable, isn't it?

Dr MEATH — Tutors do have a place. There is a place for tutors, but that is in the minority. That is in a small group of students who might be falling behind or need a bit of extra confidence building, or whatever. It should not be a matter of course, and I think we communicate that to our parents at every opportunity.

Ms ARNOTT — At every information session.

The CHAIR — I am very pleased to hear that.

Ladies and gentlemen, we are going to take the opportunity to have the students sitting in your place. If you would not mind, please take a position in the gallery.

As the four students take their places, I want you to know that you are most welcome and we are doing this deliberately because we really want to hear from you. We understand that it might be a little bit difficult for you on a few fronts: the fact that this is a parliamentary inquiry and therefore a very different circumstance that you have found yourselves in, and importantly, too, that you have such senior people from your school here with you today. This inquiry is to help students around Victoria have the best possible result, so the contributions that you can make are going to be very real and very direct. We are going to be addressing you only by your first names because the formalities here respect the fact that you are minors.

We have Michelle, Eadie, Susan and Karen. Welcome to the four of you. I can you see you are wearing a lot of insignia; I can see that you have obviously assumed a lot of leadership roles within the school community that are probably worthy of great commendation. It is terrific to have you here today. Have you thought about which person might have some opening remarks? You are most welcome to just set the scene from your point of view if you would like to take that opportunity.

KAREN — As a whole I think that as just four people we might not represent the wider community, but in our opinion we think there should be less homework. As Eadie said to us before, some people think there should be more homework, but the thing is that just because they get more homework, it is not — —

SUSAN — I think having homework makes people feel comfortable that they are doing something.

MICHELLE — It is just self-assurance.

The CHAIR — It makes you feel comfortable?

SUSAN — I am talking about students in general, not me personally, but I think that going to the tutor that the teachers were speaking about before and having a lot of homework makes people feel that they are doing something that can help them in their future. I do not feel that that is necessarily the case. I also feel that some teachers feel obliged to give homework because they know that that will comfort, to an extent, the students. A lot of the time we get homework that is set where it is basically comprehension questions, and it is not useful, particularly at VCE level.

EADIE — That being said, there are definitely a lot of students who have to go to tutoring and despise it, but they have to do it because their parents make them.

SUSAN — But I think even those students, if they were to give up tutoring, would feel like they were at a disadvantage.

EADIE — Yes, but no.

KAREN — I feel like the tutoring culture has changed from, 'I'm behind; I'm going to go to a tutor because I do not really understand this' to 'I'm going to get a tutor because I want to get ahead of the cohort' and stuff, which to me is a bit pointless because you are going to do this stuff in class anyway, and you have a teacher there to help you. Why not use the teacher instead of using a tutor?

MICHELLE — I think, following on from what Karen said, it is not really just, 'I'm behind'; it is more, 'I'm going to get ahead. I need to beat the crowd'. I guess why that is is because we are at MacRob. We are at a very competitive school and all of us are very smart. We are smart people versus smart people, so we are trying to get the best out of a bunch of smart people already. It is kind of like a competition within the classroom — 'Eadie has a tutor. I've got to get a tutor as well; otherwise she is going to get 100 per cent and I'm going get 99 per cent, and I'm not going to be very happy'.

The CHAIR — Is it exhausting?

MICHELLE — Yes, it is very exhausting, and I think it is very exhausting because I am not usually the winner in any of these races, to be honest! I think that is where the stress comes in. This is where a lot of MacRobians feel very stressed — 'I'm not actually very smart; I got a B in the SAC whereas everybody else got an A'. In reality, when you go to just a local school or something, you are the best, and you will be getting an A, but because you are at MacRob and you get a B your self-esteem goes down because other people are better than you. But in reality you are actually still very good.

The CHAIR — Can anybody just describe for us what you do for relaxation — for a change of pace from what you have to do in year 12 from the routine of study and all of the other responsibilities you have?

KAREN — Like hobbies? Everyone has hobbies, I guess. I read. I play tennis every weekend, and I go to the library. I ride my bike. I was talking to Michelle about this earlier. I said, 'I have homework due the next day. Should I go play tennis or should I go do my homework?'. I will always pick 'Play tennis' because which one am I going to remember in, say, 10 years or next week? It has to be, 'I'm going to play tennis' because it will be beneficial to me in the future.

SUSAN — I think everybody does different things. At MacRob I think music is a big thing.

EADIE — And sport.

SUSAN — And sport. I think that is what most people do. But even that is still quite competitive. I know people who practise violin for 2 or 3 hours on a weekday and then 4 hours on the weekend — crazy stuff. Even that, which is a hobby, can still be stressful.

The CHAIR — I am starting to wonder when you sleep.

EADIE — To relax, I am very committed to extracurriculars. This week I have 25 hours of extracurriculars that I am going to do. That is a way of relaxing. That is what I do with my life. I want to be a performer, so I do 25 hours of performance a week. I guess you could say that it is a form of tutoring, in a weird way. It is also a hobby, and it is a way of relaxing for me.

The CHAIR — It gives you a release. Is it cathartic and does it help you let down?

EADIE — Yes, definitely.

MICHELLE — I think I am the same as Eadie. I really like extracurricular activities, and at school I am involved in the student representative council. I enjoy it and feel a bit of satisfaction out of it, and that is why I really enjoy participating in extracurricular activities. Sometimes I am not exactly the smartest in my class, so when I do not get the satisfaction out of my homework or school tasks I go to extracurricular activities and I feel much more relaxed. I feel as if everyone is equal. We are all playing sport together or we are all doing student representative council activities together. It makes you more relaxed and draws you away from schoolwork for a bit.

SUSAN — I just want to add to that. I feel that at MacRob everybody's identity is centred on their intelligence. Coming into MacRob meant not really knowing how you fit into the school environment anymore because you were not really known for your intelligence. I think a lot of people turned to extracurriculars. You have performers, like Eadie, and you have people who are good at sport or music. Everyone found an alternative identity in extracurricular activities. I think that is a really good thing to have.

KAREN — Just adding to what Susan said, so often you see people who get a test back and they relate their test result to their self-worth and what they are worth as a person. I feel that that is part of the learning culture at MacRob. It is such a competitive environment. Sometimes it gets really unhealthy. I feel that that is why extracurriculars are so important for us as MacRob students. It is a release from that almost toxic test culture environment. I think people should learn for the sake of learning, not for what is going to be on a test. At the end of the day, you learn for information and stuff like that.

Mr BROOKS — The competitive feeling has been mentioned a couple of times. Where do you think that comes from? Is it that students feel it themselves or is it from families?

EADIE — I think it is a bit of both. The first thing everyone asked me on orientation day in year 8 was, 'How many superiors did you get?, which was in reference to the entrance exam. The highest mark you can get for each category is superior. So people would ask how many superiors you got. If you said, 'I got five' and someone else said, 'I got six', you would think 'Oh, she got six; she's better'. That is how people identify on day one. People bring it with them. I think it is something to do with the particular set of students. They already have that before they come, and MacRob is a breeding ground for it. It is there from the start.

Mr BROOKS — If I could ask one quick question to follow up; it jumps back to a different topic. In terms of the people you might know who have tutors, or if you have tutors yourselves, how do students and parents select the tutor? Most parents are not educators. Some are, but most are not. How do they know which tutor to select? Do you talk to other students about who is really good? How does that work?

SUSAN — I think it is primarily word of mouth. If somebody you know has a good tutor and says they are a good tutor, you would just go for that. Also they are chosen based on suburban areas — for example, somebody who lives next to you.

Mr BROOKS — Someone who is geographically closer.

MICHELLE — I have a tutor for Latin. Latin is a subject not offered inside MacRob, so it is really hard for me to learn. I also do it through distance education, so I do not actually have lessons with my teacher. The main way of communicating is through mail — the post — and telephone lessons. That is why I also have a tutor. I feel as if I do not have anyone in the role of teacher, so I need someone to teach me. With distance education you very much self-teach, read from papers and learn your grammar points from paper. If you do not understand, you cannot rely on classmates because you do not have a class.

It is very, very hard, and that is why I have a tutor. I chose my tutor according to price as well. Online there are a lot of tutors and I chose, I guess, from their descriptions. I guess their study score is really important to a lot of us — 'Oh, they got a 50 in Latin. Yep, they're good. We've got to pick her' — or they have the Premier's award or whatever. I think qualifications and also word of mouth are important, with other people telling you, 'Yes, this tutor is good'.

Mrs MILLAR — I am interested in your overall statement that you made at the very start when you came in that you would like to see less homework. I am interested in your views of what you think the maximum number of hours of home study should be on average per night for students at your level.

KAREN — Does this home study not include homework?

Mrs MILLAR — Homework and home study. What should be the maximum number of hours to allow you to do your extra curriculum? You talked about how important the extracurricular activities are to each of you. What should be the maximum amount of hours set at your level in your view?

SUSAN — I actually think setting a maximum number of hours per night is probably the wrong thing to do. I think expecting something done that night is what is wrong. If you have got training that night, you are not going to have time to do any homework, even if it is just 1 hour. I think the expectation to have something done by the next lesson or by the next day is what is wrong, not so much the amount of homework that is set. I do not know if that is just me though.

EADIE — I agree. I think if you set a maximum number of hours, people are going to do that every night, regardless of whether they need to do homework or not. I think that is the wrong approach.

Mrs MILLAR — You might do it. I am not sure that all students out there in Victoria would be doing it.

Mr BROOKS — I am just thinking of my kids; I wish that was the case.

EADIE — I would say 2 hours maybe. I do not think there would be a reason to do any more than that.

SUSAN — I think they should set an average for the whole week rather than every night. I feel like every night you have something different to do. It is just not feasible.

EADIE — Especially seeing as the thing that most people compromise first is their sleep. If you have to cut back on something, it is sleep because people do not measure how much sleep they get and people do not stick to a schedule. They just go to sleep when they are tired and they wake up for school. If they have to do homework and they have to stay up late, that is the no. 1 thing people will compromise.

KAREN — It really depends on the effectiveness of homework. If you get 1 hour of really good homework, that actually helps you consolidate ideas, as compared to 5 hours of multiple choice questions.

SUSAN — Or comprehension questions.

KAREN — Yes. I think we feel like questions, for example, 'What is the atomic number of hydrogen?' are less effective than questions which ask you to think about the stuff you do in class and to consolidate ideas.

SUSAN — That said, that is also subject specific. It is probably not relevant to a subject like maths where the only way you can improve is by practising. It is probably more relevant in the humanities.

MICHELLE — Following on from Susan, I think the amount of time you spend on homework can also be determined by what type of class you have. I am going to bring back my Latin example. It is distance education, so I spend a lot of time on it because I have to teach myself and also do the homework. Also with the less popular subjects we have combined classes. I take German at school, and it is a combined subject class with units 3–4 and units 1–2. Being a year 11 student I am taking the units 1–2 and it is really hard because we are learning basically year 12 stuff. I spend a lot of time on my homework because I struggle a lot.

If it is a combined class and you are struggling, I think you have more time for homework, but if you are breezing through the subject, I think I would just personally read over my class notes for that day and that is it. That would probably take 20 minutes.

The CHAIR — Ladies, we have run over time because what you had to say was so engaging for us. We have to finish our time with you. I want to thank you very much for coming along today. Clearly, because you are so intelligent and so organised, you are providing balance in your own lives in terms of being able to keep up that sort of momentum, which I find somewhat encouraging. I almost feel that once you do get to university it is going to be a little bit of light relief for you. I wish you well for the rest of

your studies in year 11 and in year 12. I commend you for your contribution today. I wish you a very successful academic career in the years ahead.

MICHELLE — Thank you.

The CHAIR — I make the suggestion that you look well equipped for public life too, I would say. Thank you very much.

SUSAN — Thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.