

CORRECTED VERSION

EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the education of gifted and talented students

Melbourne — 12 September 2011

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Witnesses

Ms B. Sierakowski, Athlete Career and Education Coordinator,
Ms M. Russo, past gymnast athlete, and
Mr T. Cowley, year 12 student, St Helena Secondary College, and Australian squad representative,
Victorian Institute of Sport.

The CHAIR — Welcome to you all. We have a number of questions that we want to ask you, and you will have an opportunity to say something at the end if we have not covered anything specifically. I just need to point out a couple of things. Firstly, this is a public hearing looking at the areas of gifted and talented students and ways of supporting them. This is the Education and Training Committee, which is a joint parliamentary committee. Everything is being recorded by Hansard, and your contribution today will be used as part of evidence for our inquiry. There will be an opportunity for you to have a look at the transcript and fix any typographical errors.

The last thing I need to mention is that the evidence you give today is covered by parliamentary privilege, which is the same sort of privilege that members of Parliament are afforded. You may feel free to say what you like here. However, anything you say outside of this hearing today is not covered by the same parliamentary privilege.

I invite you to make any introductory statements you may wish to make.

Ms SIERAKOWSKI — I want to thank the committee for allowing us the opportunity to present this morning. With your permission, I want to introduce two athletes and give you a bit of their background, just to set the context. Is that okay?

The CHAIR — Yes, please. Great!

Ms SIERAKOWSKI — To my right is Monette Russo. Monette is one of Australia's best female gymnast athletes and one of our most decorated performers in terms of Australian history. She commenced gymnastics at the age of 6 and came to the Victorian Institute of Sport's scholarship program at the age of 13, so she was basically undertaking gymnastics right throughout her secondary schooling for 30 hours a week in addition to her studies.

Monette had her first national title in 2001; the Australian youth Olympics in 2003, and the Australian championships; and in 2004 she was an Olympic Games representative. Monette made history in 2005, when she began and took on the world in the 2005 world championships in Melbourne, where she gained a bronze medal. It was the first time that Australia got a medal in the sport of gymnastics. Following on from that, Monette's gymnastics team won a gold medal in the Commonwealth Games, which again was the first time Australia got a Commonwealth Games gold medal for gymnastics. Monette has had a modified educational program throughout her secondary schooling.

Tyler Cowley plays men's hockey. He is currently undertaking his year 12 studies at St Helena Secondary College. He has been basically a state representative since the under 15s.

Mr COWLEY — Under 11s.

Ms SIERAKOWSKI — Under 11s, I am corrected. He was under 17s A grade best and fairest; Australian schoolboys representative 2009; 2010 player of the Australian championships — that is, the best player in the country — and in 2010 he was selected in the Australian future squad. The reason I brought him here today is that he is actually representing Australia and doing his VCE exams internationally in November. He is doing his VCE over two years.

We have two live examples here of talented athletes on the journey who are juggling their sport and their studies.

The CHAIR — Fantastic. Thank you for coming along and joining us today. We will get into the questions, and please feel free to contribute with your own experiences, because that is certainly very valuable to us. I want to kick off by looking at the ACE, Athlete Career and Education, program. Can you explain how the ACE program works and what specific career, educational and professional development services student athletes need?

Ms SIERAKOWSKI — The program started in 1990 with Dr Frank Pyke and Deidre Anderson. Basically what the ACE program does is when an athlete comes on scholarship they have access to a whole range of services at the institute: coaching, sports science, physical preparation, psychology and athlete career and education services. It is a holistic program. We meet with the athletes one to one and just work with them to

make sure that they have a balanced approach to sporting excellence. We are managing their lifestyle so that they have their study, career et cetera happening. We have career counselling and planning, professional development opportunities, employment preparation — we are working with Monette on that now — career referral networks, transition support for athletes coming off scholarship, should an athlete be injured or retired, and then general online services.

What we are trying to do is to just support them on their journey, and it is a one-to-one process. Each athlete is different, so we are working with them to help them pursue their best sporting success but also their career and education plans, whatever they might be.

The CHAIR — You mentioned also the emotional needs that athletes have. Can you elaborate a bit further on those emotional needs and how the program supports those? Maybe it is time for one of the athletes to respond.

Ms RUSSO — For me, definitely; I was such a young person in the sport, so I really needed that support from not just the ACE program but also the VIS. In the ACE program there were people I could go and talk to and learn how to plan everything. There was so much going on in my life and my sport, and then I had to make sure that my education was a priority as well. I was able to talk to people about that and learn how to plan everything out so I could excel in all areas.

Mr COWLEY — I got inducted when I was quite young. Especially in hockey, players get inducted in an age bracket that is quite a lot older than I was. I was 16 at the time and going into year 11, so I had not yet experienced the VCE type of study — how we study in VCE and so on. I went into it in 2009, and I personally could not quite handle everything regarding training, because the training load had just increased immensely and so had my study. I found that I got worn out. That is when I went to the ACE program and spoke to Bernadette. She was able to come to the school, and we were able to devise a plan that would be able to see me through my VCE and manage my sport and my studies as well as getting the right amount of rest and support I needed. It was very good.

Ms TIERNEY — Can you describe how students apply for and are awarded scholarships with the Victorian Institute of Sport?

Ms SIERAKOWSKI — Basically it is on sports performance. In Tyler's case, he is part of a hockey squad — and in Monette's case as well — they get targeted by their sport as developing athletes, so they apply for a scholarship, and it is really on your ranking. It is pretty tough. You can go off scholarship if performances are not there, but generally speaking most of our athletes would be on scholarship for some time. Tyler has been on for three or four years now. Monette was on for over 10. So if you are maintaining your performances, you will be gaining a scholarship. But it is a state institute of sport decision with the state sporting organisation. Together they decide who are the scholarship winners for that given year.

Ms TIERNEY — In your general selection process, do you look for students with potential, or do you only accept students or athletes who are already achieving at such a high level?

Ms SIERAKOWSKI — It is only based on sport. It is a sports performance-based scholarship.

Ms TIERNEY — I understand that, but is that because you think you can see potential in someone?

Ms SIERAKOWSKI — Yes.

Ms TIERNEY — Or is it only on their actual performance, where they are already in a squad?

Ms SIERAKOWSKI — It is a combination of both, I suppose, would be the best way to say. If the athletes are performing well, then they get targeted. Then they get observed and watched, and with the support services obviously their performances then improve, so it fulfils itself, I suppose. It is a combination of talent — giftedness and talentedness — at that time but also future perspectives. Would that be fair to say?

Mr COWLEY — Absolutely.

Ms SIERAKOWSKI — Would you like to make any comments?

Mr COWLEY — I feel that especially with the hockey program we have experienced we have had a number of athletes that have not actually been on full scholarships, but they have been given a month, and it is based on the coach and, as you said, the association and outside. They see how they train, and they judge off performance, but they also judge off how disciplined they are in coming to the training, how much they actually want it. Also they see the future potential in the athlete at the time. So, yes, you are absolutely right on that, Bernadette.

The CHAIR — Can I ask a polite question? What about athletes who come in on a particular sport and find that after a while they are not able to be at the level that they need to be? Is there an opportunity for potentially switching to another area?

Ms RUSSO — Yes. At the VIS there is a transition program. If you are deciding to move over to another sport, then there are services that will support you in that area — for gymnastics especially, because we are such a young sport. When most of us gymnasts retire, a lot of us go into aerial skiing. I have been approached to go into the aerial skiing program. They are a bit too crazy for me, but they come up and you have a few meetings. They teach you about the new sport that you decide to go into and then how you move over into that sport, so there is a little program in itself there. If you are deciding to move into a new sport, then there is support for you as well.

Mr ELASMAR — In your submission you say that policies for students who sit exams while they are overseas competing or training should be reviewed. Why do you think these policies need to be reviewed, and what are the problems with the current policies in place for student athletes sitting exams overseas?

Mr COWLEY — I have just experienced this, as I am heading over to Malaysia to play in an international tournament, the 1st Sultan of Johor Cup. This is colliding with my exams — pretty much right in the middle of my exams — so I went down the avenue of finding out ways that we can beat this policy. So far it has been really good. I have managed to get the forms and the right type of stuff to do my exam over there. I would say the cost is quite a bit, though, but over all, generally, what happened was the school did not quite know exactly what could be done, so I had to wait a while until I got an answer from the school on what I could actually do. I guess that was a bit of a struggle to get, because there are certain closing dates on which the forms can be entered, and I have passed that date. I think it could be a little bit hard to even manage to fully get it, but they said they can deal with it. Yes, I think it has been handled reasonably well in my case.

Ms SIERAKOWSKI — One of the factors I think in why we sought the review in that area is that obviously there is the need for great security with VCE exams; there is no doubt about that. Where our athletes are travelling they have to sit it at exactly the same time as the students here. If they are travelling overseas, predominantly that might mean that they need to wake up in the middle of the night and sit their exam — maybe on a plane. I suppose we would be seeking a little bit of flexibility around that security issue so that it would not interfere, because that could affect their performance the next day. They could have had their phones and computers taken away from them, so they could not have access — just that little bit of review. Sometimes it is very difficult to get the right information.

Mr COWLEY — Just on that point — especially with the timing — I have actually got the schedule for the hockey game that we have got. I am doing an exam before this hockey game, and I have got to be at the field 40 minutes afterwards. Usually warm-ups start an hour before, so this is going to be a big struggle for the team management and the coaches to get this organised, because we usually all have to travel together. I think we are playing both Singapore and Malaysia, and there need to be passports — we need to go into different countries and that. Especially for that exam, which is the health and human development one, it will be a bit of a struggle to get everything sorted.

Ms RUSSO — Also, just being an elite athlete I did not have to sit any exams while I was travelling. We want to strive to be the best in our sport, but we are really focused on our education as well. We want to excel in both areas. Even though sport is the main priority in our life at this point in time, we still really want to do well in our education, because that is what is going to lead us on for the rest of our life. Both of them are high priorities, and we do not want to compromise any of them. That is why this is important to us as well.

Ms MILLER — In your submission you recommend that each school should have a nominated staff member to help student athletes. What specific support could this staff member provide to the student athletes?

Ms RUSSO — For me, this is really important to my studying, because I was always away. I was travelling a lot, being away from school, so having that one point of contact made it a lot easier, because they understood what was going on and that I was not a regular student. It helped because I was able to go straight to them. They knew my situation, and we could alter things if things needed to be altered. It is just mainly the support of having that one contact. It made it a lot easier to go and talk to them and not be overwhelmed by all the schooling that was going on.

Mr COWLEY — For me, for the last two years I have had great support from my year level manager, who has been able to keep in contact via email when I am travelling or anything. She has been able to send through my work and give me the support that I have been needing, especially when I do travel. If I am away from school for training or what have you, she is able to link me any work that needs to be caught up. That has been great support through the last two years. I have been able to have a chat to her and sort out any issues that are going on with my timetable.

Ms SIERAKOWSKI — We just felt, Elizabeth, that was a very valuable thing to have across the board for gifted and talented students that would give us a point of contact with the school. We have had a model working with athlete friendly universities through their vice-chancellors. We have had a contact person in the universities, and that has been a great support for our athletes when they go to university. To have that nominated person at a senior level that we can relate to, who can then coordinate the other staff members would be an amazing opportunity if that was possible.

Ms TIERNEY — Your submission suggests that student athletes should be allocated places in government schools close to their training centres. Why do you suggest this? Is distance between school and training centres a problem for many students?

Mr COWLEY — I find the traffic quite difficult. I live in South Morang, and my training is predominantly at the VIS, which is on Olympic Boulevard, and also in Royal Park. There are times where we might have training at 4.30 or so, and I find it quite hard in some circumstances to get to training, because I have got my schooling to look after as well. Sometimes I need to leave school early, and I miss out on maybe the extra minutes with teachers. I feel that is a great initiative, that we can go from our school, but we do not need to worry about leaving early or we do not need to worry about being late to training, and we can rock up to training on time as well as fit in our studies.

Ms TIERNEY — In your case, do you know what government school that might be?

Mr COWLEY — I would say possibly Melbourne High would be the closest, because I have got a few team mates who have attended Melbourne High School as well, and they can just grab a train or something, or they could even walk to a tram and easily get to training on time.

Ms RUSSO — For myself I went to Melbourne Girls College, and we had a partnership with them because I trained at the centre in Prahran. That was our closest school, and it was excellent to have that school and have the opportunity to go there because I was training from 7 until 10.30 every morning — so I was already missing the first few hours of school — and then I would have to go back to training at 3.30 in the afternoon, so I was already missing a couple of hours of school. Having the opportunity to go to a school that was closer and where all of us were together really assisted, because I was already missing out on a lot of school. Without the partnership, I would have had to probably travel further and therefore miss more school. I think that is a very valuable opportunity for us to have that, to be allowed into a government school closer to our training.

The CHAIR — Bernadette, just follow up to that, how students do you think would be affected by this?

Ms SIERAKOWSKI — It is a good question. We have got 400, and I would probably say 20 to 30 — —

The CHAIR — Are located outside of their training area?

Ms SIERAKOWSKI — Yes. A lot of them go to private schools. An instance that we have got this year is a young developing diver whose family built their beautiful home at Yarra Glen and he went to Ringwood Secondary College, and training is at MSAC. So this year — and it is going to change for next year because he has got a full scholarship now — he has been travelling from Yarra Glen home to training in the morning, back to Ringwood to school, back to training in the afternoon, and back home. So we are looking at 3 to 4 hours

there. We did look at schools in the area but he felt that unless he got a full scholarship the family were not prepared to make the change, and he is moving schools next year to a private school.

But having that opportunity for these two athletes as an example. It would not be very many, but just occasionally if we had that opportunity, it would lessen the stress on family life and potentially improve performance because they would have probably 2 or 3 hours less travel a day.

The CHAIR — That concludes our questions. Is there anything else that we have missed that you think you would like to also add?

Mr COWLEY — I cannot think of anything.

Ms RUSSO — I would just love to reiterate that being elite athletes and not having our sport forever, education is really, really important to us. We just want to have the best opportunity that we can while we are doing our sport as well.

The CHAIR — Fantastic. Thank you very much for coming today. Thank you to both of you as well, and good luck with your careers.

Mr COWLEY — Thanks.

Ms RUSSO — Thank you very much.

Ms SIERAKOWSKI — Thank you very much. Good luck with your work.

Witnesses withdrew.