

**ENHANCING UNIVERSITY ACCESS
IN THE CENTRAL MURRAY REGION**

Report prepared for the
MID MURRAY HIGHER EDUCATION WORKING GROUP

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CONTENTS

	Page
Executive Summary	4
Introduction	7
The Central Murray Region	9
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Description of the Central Murray Region• Economic Background of the Central Murray Region	
Education Within the Region	10
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Secondary Education• Technical and Further Education• Other Training/Education Universities Centres• Tertiary Education within the Region	
The Case for Tertiary Education to be Delivered into the Region	11
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Loss of Youth• Local Leadership• The Equity Issue• Indigenous Studies Opportunities• Deferral from Tertiary Study• Professional Staff Shortages• The Cost of Tertiary Education• Regional Economic Development• Current and Potential Initiatives/Opportunities• Internet Access	
Regional Demand for Tertiary Education	16
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Existing Demand• Potential Demand Opportunities	
University Access Models	18
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Geraldton Universities Centre• Mount Gambier• Local Model	
Preferred Delivery Model	21
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Principal Advantages of Model• Articulation Opportunities• Advantages to the Universities• Practicum Opportunities• Local Teaching Capacity	

Operational/Management Issues	26
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Facilities• Management• Operational Costs• Funding• Student Fees• University Foundation• Research Grants• Capital Development	
Governance Structure	32
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Governing Principles	
Obtaining University Places	33
Recommended Strategy	34
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Critical Timelines	
References	37
Appendices	38
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Feasibility Study Brief2. Education Within the Region3. The Case for Tertiary Education in the Region4. Demand for Tertiary Education in the Region	

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report has been prepared to identify the options for a model to provide increased tertiary education opportunity for the residents of the Central Murray region.

A catalyst for the project is local concern at the continuation of university deferral rates for the Murray Mallee Local Learning and Employment Network (MMLLEN) region being higher than the state average. The deferrals for the two largest schools within the region, being Swan Hill College and MacKillop College are 14 and 12% respectively for 2004 students against the state average of 6-7%.

Surveys and discussions with the year 11 and 12 student group of 2005 have revealed a number of core restraints and concerns about the move to tertiary study away from home. While the majority accept that it is inevitable that they will move away from the region for either study or work, others expressed the wish to remain within the region.

Many intending to leave to further study, expressed concerns at the issues they faced in both a change of location and study mode, and the difficulty in selecting the appropriate course. As a consequence, the option to study locally for at least the first year of a course, to then leave to complete their studies, was seen as attractive to many of the current college students.

Surveys of the community and school students reveal a significant demand for tertiary education in the region, that is not currently being met.

The demand appears to be principally for teacher education courses, accounting, business management, social work and nursing. However there is significant interest and opportunity within regionally significant fields such as hospitality, horticulture and natural resource management.

While there is a significant amount of tertiary study being undertaken across the region, such study is ad hoc and opportunistic in that it is accessed at the initiative of the student. This study, generally by online learning is a difficult and lonely undertaking, with no direct support or collective resource upon which to draw within two hours travel for most of the students.

Distance education by online learning is a particularly difficult option for younger students, being more suited to those who have already gained tertiary education experience.

Given the current funding issues facing universities and the relatively small number of local students, it is most unlikely that any university would want to establish a formal campus in the region because of the small numbers of potential students. Hence the need for a more innovative approach to university opportunities.

The Report recommends the establishment of an entity called the Central Murray Universities Centre, similar to that which is currently and successfully operating within the Geraldton area of Western Australia, is a suitable basis for the model for the Central Murray region.

The primary focus of the Universities Centre should be to provide access to university programs in a flexible way for an identified need and demand.

The model would be based on an ongoing assessment of priority courses and demand across the region, from which programs would be delivered.

A partnership arrangement should be developed with a preferred university, which will have primary responsibility to deliver the required courses. The relationship should be underpinned with a memorandum of agreement which would ensure the university either delivered the required courses or accessed them from another university, if the course was not within their course profile.

A significant focus of the model will be the delivery of programs which have direct relevance to needs or opportunities within the region.

The programs would include:

- undergraduate and post graduate courses, providing full and part Degree programs based on demand and viability.
- first year transfer courses.
- pathways and partnerships with TAFE, secondary and private providers.
- research and post graduate projects across the region, including partnerships with industry, research and other relevant agencies.
- support services for students engaged in practicum placements or enrolled in external studies.

The Universities Centre would:

- be independent of the university/s delivering the programs to enable it change its focus according to student demand and course availability.
- be managed by a Facilitator. It is likely that the Facilitator would be the staff complement for the initial year. Once the Universities Centre is self sufficient on an ongoing basis, sufficient staff would be engaged to provide management services and administrative support for the students.
- function as an information resource to assist the enrolment of students in courses delivered into the region by universities. It would provide a brokering service to facilitate and co-ordinate access to university studies in the region.
- be based around a “shopfront” presence within Swan Hill, estimated to cost about \$200,000 to manage per annum in the first instance. It is recommended that a relationship be investigated with the Kerang Learning Centre to provide a presence in Kerang.
- be funded to operate on an ongoing basis and provide resources to the universities to deliver the programs, by the allocation of federally funded university places through the partner university, specifically to be delivered into the region.
- Provide a significant stimulus to support the economic development of the region.

The federal government is currently allocating 39,100 new university places across universities over the next four years. The initial allocation was taken up in 2005, with the next to be made in 2006 to be available in the 2007 university year.

The next allocation is to include 2,800 places. It is anticipated the government will call for submissions from institutions for those places early in 2006, possibly February/March.

With realistic funding of places from the Commonwealth, the Universities Centre could ultimately be self-supporting. However in the initial year additional funding will be required for establishment of the Universities Centre and staff, prior to the funding flowing through for the HECS places.

It is recommended that an application be made through the partner university as a matter of priority to the Innovation and Structural Reform Fund to fully develop the courses and method of delivery. Funding should be sought to support the initial engagement of local staff and the initial operational costs of the Universities Centre and to undertake IT upgrading necessary to the Australian Academic Research Network.

The delivery of the programs will be entirely within the region, utilising the facilities available. This will be principally telecommunications and associated lecture and study space.

A university presence in the region would need to cater for about 100-150 additional students with this target being reached in about 5 years.

The model would need a minimum of thirty-five commencing student places for the initial years to enable its establishment and ensure its ongoing viability.

In order to support initiatives in the delivery of higher education into the region and to attract universities to participate with the community, the Working Group should consider the establishment of a Central Murray Universities Centre Foundation.

It will be necessary to be able to attract universities to the Central Murray to support the required courses.

While it is believed that universities will not want to establish a formal campus in the Central Murray region there has been strong endorsement by various universities, of the need to provide more opportunities in such regions. It is believed that on the basis of being able to attract "new" federally funded university places to the region, this strategy will be endorsed by the universities.

INTRODUCTION

This report has been prepared to assist the Mid Murray Higher Education Working Party to determine and pursue a preferred model of delivery of tertiary education into the Central Murray region.

The Mid Murray Higher Education Working Party is a community based group, formed under the auspice of the MMLLEN, and in conjunction with the local government Councils across the region.

The project was initiated through ongoing concerns heard across the municipalities regarding the difficulty in attracting professionally qualified people to not only fill the ongoing needs of local business and organisations, but also to enable the region to realise the potential offered by the growth of the irrigated agriculture industry along the Murray Valley.

A number of studies carried out across the region (as indicated in the Reference schedule) over the past decade have identified a range of issues, including;

- the loss of the region's youth,
- the difficulty in attracting professionally qualified people,
- the lack of university study opportunities within the region, and
- the high cost to the family and the region of sending the youth away to university.

The MMLLEN annual On Track survey also highlighted the high rate of deferral by students from the region who have been offered university placements.

It was recognised that the federal Minister for Education, Brendan Nelson, was articulating some frustration in the apparent inflexibility in the delivery of university opportunities, particularly to regional areas. The Councils and MMLLEN therefore recognised an opportunity to investigate options to deliver higher education into the region.

Discussions with local professional, education and business representatives indicated a strong support for the need to increase local access to university study.

In 2004 the MMLLEN carried out a brief survey, principally across the Swan Hill area, calling for registrations of interest in studying at university level within the region. There were in excess of 100 responses.

As a consequence the MMLLEN, in conjunction with the Swan Hill Rural City, Gannawarra Shire and Wakool Shire developed the Mid Murray Higher Education Working Party of community representatives from across the three Council areas to develop options to attract university study opportunities into the region. Representatives of the Balranald Shire and Buloke Shire were subsequently included in the Working Party to encompass the Swan Hill/Kerang regional catchment.

This report responds to the project brief developed by the Working Party (Appendix 1).

The Working Party required that the priority of the project be to identify and review existing models of delivery of tertiary education directly into the region, which would

require minimal investment into infrastructure, with available funding to be concentrated toward direct delivery of the study opportunity.

The report is not a research paper, seeking to prove the disadvantage suffered by rural and regional students in accessing tertiary studies. This is a matter which has been consistently established and widely acknowledged, requiring no further proof.

The publication, Knowledge & Skills For the Innovation Economy, A statement by the Hon. Lynne Kosky, Minister for Education and Training, on the future directions for Victorian Higher Education, issued in October 2002, asserted that *“There continues to be an inequality of access to higher education for people living in rural and remote locations”*.

It further stated that *“...Universities must be closely engaged with local communities, employers and professional associations to ensure that graduates and researchers can respond to their knowledge and skill requirements. The hopes and aspirations of our young people depend upon opportunities to improve their education. All Victorians who have the ability to engage in higher education study should have the opportunity to improve their knowledge and skills at a university.”*

This report does not argue that the Swan Hill/Kerang region is unique in its educational and professional needs, seeking rather to highlight sufficient examples of local issues and opportunities which reinforce the need to investigate innovative options to increase the access to university education within the region.

A number of universities were consulted during the project, and indicated generally their understanding of the education dilemma facing rural Australia and of the need to provide a range of flexible models of delivery to regions such as the Central Murray.

The model recommended is one which can (and should) be an opportunity for a range of regions across the country. It provides the federal government the opportunity to increase the accountability of the universities to deliver regionally relevant learning options, to recognise that Australia is a vast country, made up of a large number of developing regions, each with their own characteristics and requirements.

It offers the opportunity to address the soakage of not only the people but also the economic and intellectual capacity from the smaller regional centres and townships to the capital and regional cities.

University study epitomises that soakage, in that while it claims to provide opportunities for the youth of the rural areas, it requires them generally to leave their areas to take advantage of the opportunity.

There was general encouragement and some significant advice from the universities contacted during development of this report.

During the development of the report, a range of parties were engaged through briefing on the project and the concept being developed. Their contribution provided the background for the report.

THE CENTRAL MURRAY REGION

Description of the Central Murray Region

The Central Murray region, for the purpose of this project, incorporates the service and education catchments of the urban centres of Swan Hill and Kerang.

Based around the local government areas of Swan Hill Rural City, Shire of Gannawarra, Shire of Wakool, Shire of Balranald and the northern portion of the Shire of Buloke, it relates to the designated area of the MMLLEN with the addition of the New South Wales municipalities.

Overall it straddles the state border, encompassing an area of over 50,000 square kilometres of north-west Victoria and south-west New South Wales.

This is an area which sits between a number of other regional service centres, including Mildura, Bendigo and Echuca. It is an area which is serviced by a range of government departments, including education, from centres such as Mildura and Bendigo.

According to current census figures, 41,789 people reside within the 100km radius of Swan Hill. While 10,000 of these live in Swan Hill and 5,000 in Kerang, the balance are principally spread along the length of the Murray Valley both on farm and in numerous small towns. There is a small number within the dry-land region, away from the Murray River, in smaller townships and on farm.

Economic Background of the Central Murray Region

The clear economic driver of the region is agriculture, with the areas of agriculture, forestry and fishing engaging over 31% of all employment in the 2001 census.

The region is developing a surprising level of economic diversity, both in the split between dry land agriculture and irrigated horticultural activity and in activities such as manufacturing, the service industries and tourism. Other areas of note include transport, construction retail and wholesale trade and property & business services.

Further, the manufacturing industry, particularly in the areas of engineering, wineries, tank production and abattoirs is a particularly strong aspect of the regional economy, engaging 7% of all those in employment.

The townships throughout the region are service centres for the agricultural industry surrounding them. When agriculture flourishes, the regional economy flourishes. When agricultural activity is under pressure (such as the present drought) then the whole economy will be under pressure.

Nevertheless the diversity of the agricultural industry has served to dampen the impact of both climatic and market fluctuations, with the region exhibiting ongoing investment confidence.

The balance of the traditional reliance on dryland grain production is rapidly shifting with the growth of a range of agricultural irrigation based or allied businesses developing across the region.

EDUCATION WITHIN THE REGION

The Swan Hill/Kerang region includes eight secondary colleges/schools and a range of further education providers (refer Appendix 2).

They include the Swan Hill College, MacKillop College, Kerang Technical/High School, Balranald Central School, Manangatang P12 College, Tooleybuc Central School, Barham High School and Tyrrell College in Sea Lake.

These eight secondary schools/colleges range in size from over 1000 students at the Swan Hill College to small integrated prep to year 12 schools.

There are two TAFE institutions delivering courses into the region. Sunraysia TAFE, with a campus in Swan Hill, provides courses into both Swan Hill and Kerang.

Bendigo Regional Institute of TAFE (BRIT) delivers into Kerang.

A review is currently underway to refine the delivery of TAFE courses into Kerang through the agency of the Kerang Learning Centre.

Tertiary Education within the Region

While a significant amount of tertiary study is undertaken within the region, there are no university campuses nor any formal ongoing university presence. On an opportunistic basis, there are some individual studies in local institutions through distance education from La Trobe, Monash, Melbourne and Deakin universities.

Murray Ace in Swan Hill is currently facilitating an Agricultural Business course through Melbourne University. This has an enrolment of 3 to 4 students.

The local university study is almost entirely on an individual basis through distance education, being delivered online, with no local structure for support.

Each of the courses studied requires travel out of the region for the routine lecture or tutorial block releases. The nearest of these blocks is in Mildura or Bendigo, but also include such locations as Adelaide, Armidale, Wagga and Melbourne.

THE CASE FOR TERTIARY EDUCATION TO BE DELIVERED INTO THE REGION

“The presence of a viable university Centre in a region inevitably raises the awareness of opportunities and enables access to university for people who, in country areas, would not be able to or not be inclined to attend university studies.”
Geraldton

A range of issues have been routinely identified either as impediments to access to tertiary education by regional communities or as reasons why such communities require improved access to such higher education opportunities.

The following provides a summary of the main issues (Refer to Appendix 3 for discussion in greater depth).

Loss of Youth

A major issue for concern for the region, like all rural communities is the ongoing loss of its youth. The region has large gaps in its population for the 15 - 34 age group compared with that found at the state level which appears partly to be linked with young people leaving the region for further study or work.

The region continues to experience an ageing in its population. According to the most recent census figures, it generally has 17.8% of the population over 65 compared with a state average of 12.8%.

Local Leadership

Lack of succession of leadership coming through from within the region is compromising the future regional leadership capacity. The increased ability to study at a higher level and to remain within the region would reinforce that intellectual capital and safeguard the leadership capacity of the region.

The region has generally low levels of higher education qualifications compared to the state average. There is a generally low level of formal qualifications held across the region. The LLEN data of 2004 indicated that in the Murray Mallee LLEN area, 37.1% of residents aged 15 and over have some type of qualification, compared with 46.3% in Victoria as a whole. The most common qualification is a certificate, having been attained by 15 per cent of the population.

Approximately 5% of the community hold a Diploma, Graduate or Advanced Diploma or Graduate Certificate against a Victorian average of 20.6% and 22.6% in New South Wales.

A further 5% of the MMLLEN population have a Bachelor or Post-graduate Degree or higher. This compares to the portion of the population holding higher qualifications in Victorian of 14.2% and 13.5% in New South Wales.

The Equity Issue

It is generally acknowledged that rural and regional students do not enjoy the same level of either choice or access to higher education.

The option to leaving the region, distance education, with no administrative, tutorial or colleague support is a very difficult exercise and one which experiences a high

rate of attrition. There is anecdotal evidence of people within the region who, on wishing a career change, have had to forfeit their employment to relocate to a centre offering on-campus study, even though their future career is available within the region.

Some of these people remain living in the region but are forced to live away from home during semesters. Others need to relocate their families.

This is a penalty which the metropolitan person who can continue to work while studying part time on-campus, need not suffer.

Indigenous Study Opportunities

With approximately 2,800 Koorie residents across the Murray Valley, and comprising 4% of the Swan Hill area population, the region has one of the largest indigenous communities within Victoria.

The dilemma in the area of training and education is evident within the Koorie community, highlighted by the statistics within the Swan Hill Rural City, the area of greatest concentration of the Koorie population;

		% Attending Education
Indigenous	Males age 5 - 14	83%
	Females age 5 - 14	88%
Non Indigenous	Males age 5 - 14	94%
	Females age 5 - 14	95%
Indigenous	Males age 15 - 19	29%
	Females age 15 - 19	59%

While the attendance at education for indigenous children between ages 5 and 14 are lower but comparable with the non indigenous community, the number still in education after 14 takes a significant fall.

The Victorian state government has established eight regional committees across the state under the auspice of the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc (VAEAI) which work in conjunction with OTTE to establish improved pathways for training and education of the Koorie community.

This project region falls across the boundary of the Murray Valley Region, incorporating Swan Hill and Mildura, and the Loddon Campaspe Region, incorporating Kerang, Echuca and Bendigo.

Each of these is in the process of developing a Regional Training Plan which will set out the local priorities for training. The draft of the Murray Valley Region 2006 Plan has been developed, outlining the following preferred areas of study;

- General – cross cultural, governance
- Horticulture – viticulture, food production
- Trades – mechanic, engineering
- Transport – warehouse, logistics, driving
- Health & Community Services – social welfare
- Business – administration, business skills
- Tourism – ATSI tour guides.

There is strong evidence that a major disincentive for Koorie students to continue on to university study is their cultural reluctance to leave their community and particularly their family group, a reluctance which is more evident than for the non indigenous community. This places the Koorie community at a significant disadvantage in gaining tertiary education which requires them to leave home to study.

On line distance education is not the answer, given the difficulties of that method for someone who does not have tertiary study experience.

While a range of certificate studies are available and accessed by the Koorie community at the local TAFE and Training providers, minimal university study is undertaken. Some is being done via distance education by mature aged Koories from the Swan Hill area in the fields of Health, Teaching and Nursing.

The Koorie community is a part of the region's community which would be able to benefit most from the opportunity for locally provided and supported university study.

Deferral from Tertiary Study

The region has a continuing high rate of deferral from taking up university study offers. According to the 2004 Victorian On Track data, the students from the region's Victorian Colleges are deferring at approximately twice the state average. The rates of deferral of the two largest colleges, in MacKillop and Swan Hill figures are 12% and 14% respectively.

From discussions with the students of each College, there are a range of reasons relating to their decision to defer, including:

- The initial stress of leaving family, friends and community.
- Loss of family support.
- Major change of new places and people all hit at once.
- Comfortable with small town lifestyle.
- Family financial constraints.
- Uncertain of course selection due to the large range of courses available.
- Not sure what career they yet want to embark on.
- Feel they need another year to mature.
- Need for a break from study before starting a further 4 – 6 years.
- Concern at changing mode of study and living at same time.

As a result of the course uncertainty among a number of students, heightened by the general anxiety at the significant change in their life, the option to do a transition year at home was very popular.

Approximately 19% of the students surveyed during development of this report, who intended to continue to study, indicated interest in the transitional year study option.

Generally it was seen to allow a further year for the student to mature, to be more certain about the course of study they have chosen, and to become accustomed to the changed mode of learning.

This need for certainty was raised at each College. While it is not uncommon for students to change course direction mid study, it is far less an option to do so when the cost to send a student away to university is \$18,000 - \$20,000 each year.

The cost of failure by the student for a rural family is significantly higher than for a family where the student has the option to remain at home. Courses failed add considerably to a student's HECS debt.

Professional Staff Shortages

Local employers continue to experience significant difficulty in attracting professionally qualified staff, in part due to the difficulty to continue to study within the region.

As a consequence, many organisations now create their own professional staff by engaging unqualified staff or transferring existing staff and providing appropriate study opportunity and support.

This requires time and access to study from outside the region, a significant penalty to the employer.

An opportunity exists due to the changing financial circumstances of the family farm, for the regional community to step up to fill a number of the professional requirements. There is increased incentive and need for the farming partnership, principally through the spouse, to find off-farm employment to supplement the income.

The experience is also that with the increased mobility of the community, many of the spouses of farmers do not now consider themselves to be committed full time to the farming operation. They look naturally to either continue or develop their own career.

This provides an opportunity to offer those farming families and others additional career choices and is fertile ground for inducement for the partner to study in a field needed within the region.

The Cost of Tertiary Education

The cost of sending a student away to university, including study costs and living and travel expenses is \$18,000 - \$20,000 each year, a total cost of up to \$80,000 plus HECS for a four year degree.

Despite the flourishing development of the agricultural industry across the region, the socio-economic capacity of its population remains one of the lowest in the state.

The median weekly family income is within the range of \$700 - \$799 for the Swan Hill and Gannawarra municipalities and from \$600 - \$699 for the other municipal areas. The median weekly family income for both Victoria and New South Wales is \$800 - \$999.

The generally low level of family income across the region is highlighted by over 68% of families earning less than \$50,000 per annum.

From the 2001 census, 37% of families across the region have an annual income of less than \$36,400 (\$700/week).

Hence to send one student to university costs more than 50% of the annual income of over one third of the families across the region.

Regional and Economic Development

Significant corporate finance is flowing into the region in the development of major irrigation sector projects in high value crops, including a range of nuts, vegetables, grapes, olives and fruit.

The shortage of unskilled and semi-skilled labour has been addressed by the importing of transient workers or by use of specialist contract firms from outside the district. The shortage of skilled and professional people is a greater dilemma, requiring a different solution.

The region does not have a small number of dominant employers, but comprises a range of small business. Hence the requirement for business management and technical skills required to sustain the growth enterprises is becoming more critical.

The cost of tertiary study is a significant flow of finance out of the region and at the same time a significant contribution by the rural community to the economic wealth of the regional centres and cities.

The capture of only a relative small number of university places, in the order of 40 – 50 to enable those students to study locally would collectively prevent the loss and provide a return to the region of between \$2.64million and \$3.52million.

Current and Potential Initiatives/Opportunities

Each region of Australia has its individual characteristics and needs. Within each there is the potential to develop a field of expertise which puts a stamp on the region.

The principal areas of development within the Central Murray are the expansion of a range of horticultural enterprises and the natural resource management issues which are particular to the area.

Development of study opportunities particular to the needs or opportunity within the region provides the opportunity for creation of a 'centre of excellence'.

Internet Access

The option of undertaking distance education study is compromised due to difficulties associated with computer and internet access for people living in this region.

Outside of the two major urban centres, the speed of internet services to homes is generally limited.

Hence, computer use and internet access across the region, measured in 2001, was relatively low, with 31.4% of homes utilising a computer and 27.8% utilising internet access.

REGIONAL DEMAND FOR TERTIARY EDUCATION

Surveys of likely demand were carried out across the region during 2004 and 2005 (Appendix 4)

The first survey, carried out by the MMLLEN, asked for expressions of interest from the general community regarding studying at university level within the region. There were 105 responses indicating an interest in studying locally.

The range of preferred course areas was broad, however the priority courses nominated were:

- Bachelor Degree in Business Management
- Bachelor of Commerce/Accounting
- Masters/Degree in Social Work
- Graduate Diploma in Nursing (Emergency/Critical Care)
- Masters in Education
- Degree in Teaching (Primary/Pre-school)
- Degree in Law

The second survey was carried out during 2005, asked the students of years 11 and 12 within the eight regional colleges the following three principal questions:

- whether they were interested in continuing to study at university level
- whether they preferred to study locally, including an initial year option
- their preferred field of study

The result was a very high desire to study at home, either for a full course or for the initial year as a preparation to continuing further study on-campus.

The option to study locally for the first year with the view to then relocate was included due to the high deferral rates across the region, and as a response to the direct discussions held with the students where they clearly articulated their concerns about the dramatic change to their lives that they faced at the end of year 12.

College	Intending to continue study			Prefer to study within the region		
	Yes	No	Unsure	Yes	Initial Year	No
Swan Hill College	75	15	42	47	24	61
MacKillop College	68	5	23	26	19	51
Tyrrell College	21	3	2	4	6	16
Kerang Tech/High	43	0	21	28	13	23
Balranald Central	11	3	7	7	3	11
Manangatang P12	9	1	2	0	1	11
Tooleybuc Central	14	1	1	7	2	7
Barham High School	18	4	6	13	3	9
Total	259	32	104	132	71	192
Total Surveyed	395			395		
Proportion of surveyed	66%	8%	26%	33%	18%	49%

While not all students who intend to continue study nominated their intended course, a number of those currently undecided, nominated their preference if they continued on to study. Similarly a number who do not intend to continue to study nominated a course, indicating they would reconsider if the course was provided locally.

While there was a range of course areas nominated, many of which would not likely to be able to be justified in delivering locally, either in priority or numbers, 119 or 32% of the responses were from the areas of education, business, nursing/health and engineering. These are all course areas which have particular local relevance.

The most desired area of study of those surveyed was in Education, including Physical Education, Primary and Secondary School teaching with 47 respondents (12% overall).

Priority Courses	Respondents	% of Surveyed
Education	47	12%
Business	34	9%
Nursing/Health	26	7%
Engineering	19	5%

“It is not wise to attempt too much precision in analysis of demand for training and education for the future in Swan Hill, particularly if we rely too much on current demand. One of the problems currently facing Swan Hill and similar regions is that limited opportunities exist now in the region and as a result that many people go elsewhere, many others do not proceed with further education and training and many people, particularly qualified people, do not come to Swan Hill because there are such limited opportunities for further training. Nevertheless an estimate of current demand gives a lower limit to the possibilities for the future.” Hughes, 2000

Using relevant population proportions and current population in the development of the Geraldton model (discussed below), it was determined a reasonable target over the subsequent 5-7 years was 200-300 local students in Geraldton. The Geraldton region is approximately the same population as the Central Murray and similarly had no local university campus.

In the short term there appears to be a roughly even demand for places between the mature aged respondents and the secondary students.

It is likely though that the ongoing flow through of students from the colleges will comprise the major source of numbers. Portion of the mature aged response no doubt reflects a built up demand.

However, there is no doubt that the survey process did not capture the entirety of the mature aged demand across the region. It is realistic to believe that the demand will only grow once the possibility to study locally becomes a reality.

With adequate promotion of the Universities Centre, it is likely that the region’s industry, businesses and agencies would take the opportunity to base much of their professional development programs around access through the local study option.

It is feasible then that the demand within 5 years would be of the order of 150 students.

UNIVERSITY ACCESS MODELS

“There are many other situations in Australia with similar circumstances to Swan Hill, namely a desire for more education and training opportunities but without the population to support stand-alone institutions. A variety of combinations is being used with some unique features but many aspects are of relevance to Swan Hill. In Ararat, Ourimba, Bateman’s Bay, Nowra, Bega, Dubbo, Coffs Harbour and Albany, among others, there are arrangements where university, TAFE and senior secondary students all use the same facilities and have received funding from federal and state authorities to make it possible. A number of different administrative arrangements are in operation but all have a clear agreement to make optimal use of resources in the interest of all learners...” Hughes, 2000

There are a number of regional university campuses and presence of universities within regional areas, but Swan Hill wishes to investigate opportunities whereby the overall control of the delivery of university courses rests with the community, rather than the institutions. Given the current funding issues facing universities, they are in a phase of centralisation, rather than extending to new campuses. We are all familiar with the decision by Melbourne University to withdraw from Longeranong.

Additionally it is most unlikely that any university would want to establish a formal campus in the region because of the small numbers of potential students. This was the finding of the study into the options for Geraldton, Western Australia, a region of similar population to the Central Murray.

Hence the need for a more innovative approach to university opportunities.

Two models of delivery of university study into a rural area were considered. The Geraldton Universities Centre and the Mount Gambier campus of UniSA were selected as they most closely represented the local ownership of delivery of university learning into a region.

Geraldton Universities Centre

The Geraldton Universities Centre (GUC) was formed in 2002 by the Geraldton University Access Group, a working party similar to the Mid Murray Higher Education Working Party.

The Access Group was successful in convincing the federal minister of the need within the region and received university places allocated to the Geraldton region.

The model is based on a local organisation identifying the university course demand within the region and ‘tendering for universities to utilise the places to deliver the selected courses directly into Geraldton.

The places were retained by the Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA) which undertook the tendering process to deliver the courses.

The model operates along the following lines:

- Initially operated out of and works in conjunction with the Central West College of TAFE, which provides the library source.
- Employs a Director, whose role is to co-ordinate the educational programs and the academic staff delivering them.

- Provide a range of full 3 or 4 year courses and first year of courses to be subsequently completed on-campus in Perth.
- Courses are currently delivered by a consortium of University of WA, Curtin University of Technology and Edith Cowan University.
- The universities employ and provide the casual tutors and sessional lecturers, mostly locals.
- Lectures are delivered online. No video conferencing. Students attend only for tutorials and sessional lectures.
- Lectures developed by university and stored and delivered throughout year.
- Lecturers visit on a basis appropriate to each course.
- The programs started with 20 federally allocated university places in 2002, developing to 35 in 2003 and 45 in 2004.
- Total of 149 students in 2004, 140 in 2003.
- Each year the universities decide on the division of places according to courses and student numbers.
- The students enrolled are an enrolled student of the respective university.
- As at June 2004, the Universities Centre employed 0.8 Admin Assistant, 0.4 Finance Officer, 0.8 Student and Staff Services Officer.

The Universities Centre is funded by being paid 48.5% of each federally funded university place. The balance of the place is retained by the university to deliver the program.

The government provides the funding to the University delivering each course. GUC invoices the universities for their portion. Hence this operational funding flows through periodically throughout the year.

Operational costs including salaries, rental of TAFE facilities:

Year	Operational Costs	Income	Surplus/(Deficit)
2002	209,906	212,000	2,094
2003	304,352	374,326	69,884
2004	617,023	628,209	11,186
2005 anticipated	556,736	556,736	0

Courses currently offered;

- Bachelor of Arts
- Bachelor of Computer Science
- Bachelor of Commerce and Bachelor of Economics
- Bachelor of Health Science
- Bachelor of Education (Primary and Early Childhood)
- Bachelor of Arts – Training and Development
- Bachelor of Science (Nursing)
- Foundation Studies Enabling Program for Rural and Isolated Students
- Bachelor of Education (Conversion for Qualified Teachers)
- Bachelor of Arts (Visual Arts)

The Universities Centre was allocated \$2.5million to build a new administration and training facility (now in construction) as a response to the need to expand from the shared use of the TAFE facilities, and the perceived need by the community to have an identity. Anecdotal evidence is that the Geraldton community desire to build the Universities Centre was to make a statement regarding local ownership, and not to

have the project seen as a component of a TAFE or university program controlled by Perth.

Mount Gambier

The Mount Gambier model is markedly different. Although university places have been allocated by the federal minister to be delivered into Mount Gambier, they were allocated directly to UniSA to deliver the courses.

The community had no input into either the courses or how they would be delivered, as the government determined both the courses to be delivered and that UniSA would gain the places.

UniSA is now carrying out a study to quantify the regional demand and priority courses to guide the future allocation of places and course priority.

The “campus” is shared with and leased from the South East TAFE within which it has established a “Regional Study Centre” employing 1 staff member.

Other facilities are used as required, eg. Nursing uses the Catholic College laboratory.

In an initiative to avoid being “just another distance education deliverer”, lectures are delivered by video conference each week, with the lecturer and notes on screen to enhance interaction with students.

It is a requirement of courses that students attend lectures and tutorials.

UniSA employs and trains all tutors, who need to have a minimum of a Masters qualification.

Courses currently available:

- Bachelor of Business
- Bachelor of Nursing
- Bachelor of Social Work
- Bachelor of Business (Management Information Systems)

The model is operating with 40 allocated places together with some existing places which UniSA transferred, to accommodate approximately 80 students studying on a full or part time basis.

Local Model

In 1999, MacKillop College engaged the Australian Catholic University to deliver the Graduate Diploma in Religious Studies to 15 staff. The course was delivered via weekend blocks where lecturers visited, utilising the facilities of the College. The cost to each participant was approximately \$3,000.

This experience, which is reported to have been very successful, is a basis for the model developed for tertiary education to the region.

PREFERRED DELIVERY MODEL

Victoria is unique in that most of its regional higher education provision is undertaken by metropolitan based universities. There has traditionally been an assumption that regional campuses will relate to a single institution. But, given that universities have varying areas of specialisation, it may be desirable to develop regional higher education Centres from which several institutions deliver programs. There is potential for significant collaboration among universities and TAFE institutions, including sharing staff and infrastructure to enhance course provision.” Kosky, 2002

The Working Party is also keen to ensure the emphasis of the model is the delivery of programs and does not create significant infrastructure, utilising that which exists across the region, wherever possible.

Hence, based on the previous discussion of delivery models, it is recommended that the Central Murray region adopt a model based largely on the model now operating successfully in Geraldton, by creation of a Central Murray Universities Centre.

There are differences recommended, principally that the degree of direct interaction between student and lecturer/tutor be significantly increased and that there not be an emphasis on building a stand-alone facility.

The Central Murray region is well served with existing facilities, and it is believed that the focus should remain on the delivery of programs, and not allow the community to be distracted by a campaign to gain funding to build any additional facility. To do so leaves the community open to disappointment and a sense that the concept has failed if the funding is not forthcoming.

The primary focus of the Universities Centre should be to provide access to university programs in a flexible way for an identified need and demand. This may range from articulated courses with TAFE to face-to-face instruction, supervised external studies or web based programs.

The concept of a Universities Centre is that it would be a community based and governed organisation, which would remain so regardless of the finetuning of the model of delivery.

A primary role envisaged for a Universities Centre would be as a brokering agency providing information and support for people from the region. The role can be best described as:

- Ascertain, on a rolling annual basis, demand for particular university courses,
- Facilitate the delivery of university programs as required,
- Establish and maintain an appropriate relationship with appropriate universities to deliver the most effective and cost efficient courses,
- Support and mentor students undertaking various programs, and
- Encourage and facilitate universities to undertake research activities in the area, appropriate to regional needs.

The model would be based on an annual rolling assessment of priority courses and demand across the region, from which programs would be delivered through the partner university. If the required course/s were not within the area of speciality of the partner university, then it would be required to bring another university to the region to deliver the course/s.

A significant focus of the model will be the delivery of programs which have direct relevance to needs or opportunities within the region.

The programs to be delivered would include:

- undergraduate and post graduate courses contracted from existing Universities, providing full and part Degree programs based on demand, regional relevance and viability.
- first year transfer courses.
- pathways and partnerships with TAFE, secondary and private providers.
- research and post graduate projects across the region, including partnerships with industry, research and other relevant agencies.
- support services for students engaged in practicum placements or enrolled in external studies.

The broad principles of the model are:

- The Universities Centre will be locally 'owned' and managed by a regional Board drawn largely from the local community.
- All aspects of the course will be delivered locally.
- The course can be delivered at the location where the demand is greatest. It may be any of the townships with adequate facilities, though most usually Swan Hill or Kerang.
- Local tutors and sessional lecturers will be engaged by the delivering university/s to provide ongoing support.
- The blocks or sessions will be provided locally with lecturers travelling to the region.
- Academic standards for each course would be set by the participating university/s.
- Local facilities, principally at TAFE and the colleges will be utilised for the sessions.
- Although material may be available on-line, interaction will be enhanced by lectures being delivered via video conference, internet based external programs supported by tutors, by "block release", or intensive "weekend retreats" to enable engagement between student and lecturer.
- Lectures can be delivered out of "school hours", during evenings and weekends.
- Attendance at lectures/tutorials to be a requirement of the course.
- A collective library will be provided at the Swan Hill (it currently provides library facilities for Sunraysia TAFE) and Kerang municipal libraries.
- Practicums will be provided locally wherever possible.
- Local research will be a natural flow on from the practical components of the courses.

The primary role of the Universities Centre is administration, facilitation and information, and not the provision of university courses.

The Universities Centre would function as an information resource to assist the enrolment of students in courses delivered into the region by universities. It would provide a brokering service to facilitate and co-ordinate access to university studies in the region.

In reality, there is no reason why it should not provide an information and support service for people wishing to study courses with universities not on offer at the Universities Centre.

While there may seem a conflict in assisting students move away to study outside the region, it is imperative to assist as many locals as possible to further study. In reality the Universities Centre is not likely to deliver all of the study relevant to local needs, and experience is that these are the qualified professionals who are the most likely to return to rural and regional Australia, whether or not they return to this region.

Within the critical role of the relationship with the universities, there were two options considered. They include the competitive approach taken by the Geraldton model or the establishment of a partner university, which either delivers or facilitates delivery of the required programs by another appropriate university.

1. The competitive model requires that the places be held on the behalf of the region by a party, most probably by DEST, while a tendering process is carried out whereby the universities bid to deliver either all of the courses or within their area of speciality. The places are then allocated to the successful university/s.

A key aspect of the proposed Universities Centre is its role in “brokering the best education deal” for the student.

The Universities Centre would not be restricted to one University and hence could facilitate courses from many different Universities.

2. The partnership approach involves identification of a University which displays a commitment to the region and which has the capacity and the focus to deliver most if not all of the courses relevant to the region.

A memorandum of Agreement with the University would require it to bring another university to the relationship to deliver any required courses which are not within their field of specialisation.

This option acknowledges that it is the universities which both bid for and are allocated the funded places. The places can be banked so they are delivered to a discrete area for designated courses.

It also gives the opportunity to establish the relationship with a university which has the research capacity and focus relevant to the area.

The partnership is the preferred approach.

The advice from the Geraldton experience is that there are significant differences in the commitment of the universities delivering their courses.

Curtin, which is acknowledged as the regional university of Western Australia, has shown continued commitment, is able to fill its courses and gained considerable community profile as a result. As a consequence of their local profile they have attracted a number of students from the region to their other campuses.

The other universities have not been as committed, struggling for numbers in their courses.

It would be an advantage in being able to identify a committed partner, which has an evident regional focus, with whom to develop a clearly articulated agreement.

The obligation of development of the articulation pathways would then more formally include the university.

The Universities Centre would be based around a “shopfront” presence within Swan Hill.

While there are advantages in cohabiting with either the Sunraysia TAFE or one of the Swan Hill colleges, the experience of Geraldton is that the community needs to identify with the Universities Centre as being independent of any other institution which is controlled by government.

However the current review in Kerang, with the Kerang Learning Centre developing as a ‘one stop shop’ for either delivery or information about post compulsory learning into Kerang, offers a real option to provide into that area, a range of the information and support services required by the model.

Hence the opportunity to provide appropriate services out of the Kerang Learning Centre should also be investigated.

Principal Advantages of the Model:

The principal advantages offered by the model include:

- Provides an incentive and opportunity for locals to access university training without leaving the region.
- Community control – breaks down the territorial control of universities where the one which is regarded as the ‘owner’ of a region is able to dictate the university access which that region will have.
- The emphasis of the courses of study can be those which meet the needs or opportunities of the region.
- Increased and more efficient utilisation of local facilities. No additional infrastructure is required.
- The Universities Centre would be independent of the university/s delivering the programs, enabling it to change its focus according to student demand and course availability.
- Provides a cost-efficient mode of delivery of courses by the university/s.
- A pool of colleagues studying locally, providing a support base for discussion and testing of views.
- Reduces the main concern with distance education, being the loneliness and isolation from both the institution and from fellow students.
- The likely smaller class sizes provide improved interaction capacity between lecturer, tutor and student.
- Providing ongoing support for students through local tutors with an understanding of local characteristics and issues.
- Provides an opportunity for locally based professionals to provide input to the community in roles of tutors.
- The presence of the Universities Centre sends a powerful message to the community that they have university study available within the region, which is regarded as important on the Resume of any community.
- Creates an incentive to develop and deliver research opportunities locally.

- Provides opportunity for local business to invest in the local education via scholarships.
- Ensures the bulk of the cost of the study is spent locally, reducing the flow of finance out of the region to the regional centres and cities.

Advantages to the Universities

There is an attraction for the Universities in a number of ways:

- Community profiling - introduces the university to the consciousness of the region, hence being in a position of being identified as the “university of choice”. Important for others considering courses not offered through the Universities Centre.
- In providing the first year of a course within the region, they would have the first option on those students relocating to their campus in later years.
- Provides a cost effective method of delivering funded places.
- Increased funded places.

Creating a relationship with a region also puts the University in a good position to be in the running to engage in research activity which will generate across the region.

The model allows universities to deliver additional places without any call on their existing facilities or administrative workload. They could utilise existing lecturers, utilising their share of the funding to engage local tutors.

Curtin University, which is the main regional campus provider in Western Australia, advises that the Geraldton delivery is the most cost effective of any of their regional courses.

CGU have undertaken assessments of the cost to the universities to deliver the courses into Geraldton and advise that the funding model they have adopted of 51.5% of the federal funding plus the applicable HECS adequately covers the university’s costs in delivering the programs.

It is necessary to identify universities which will be interested in supporting such a model. It is not a totally new concept, given the MacKillop project with the Australian Catholic University.

In that case, however the program utilised places relocated by the university. This model cannot rely on places being relocated by universities, but will depend upon new places allocated by the federal government

On the basis of being able to gain new places, universities have expressed an interest in being able to put forward a proposal to form the partnership.

Articulation Opportunities

A necessary requirement of the partner university is that it would work closely with the Sunraysia TAFE and BRIT to investigate and develop a range of pathway programs. It is initially apparent there are opportunities in the business and health (nursing) areas.

While the relatively small range of courses and the ongoing review to deliver those which are the current regional priorities will mean the articulation options remain limited, nevertheless the option should become one which is routinely explored.

A carefully negotiated series of articulated courses could be of significant benefit to TAFE and of marked benefit to people in the region who may eventually want to undertake university studies. They would also allow additional university courses to be provided for the number of places allocated as the places need not be utilised for each year of the course.

Division 2 Nursing course is already offered at the Swan Hill campus of Sunraysia TAFE. The closest option to upgrading to Division 1 requires study through the Mildura or Bendigo campuses of Latrobe University. As Nursing was one of the priority courses identified through the survey process, this immediately offers the opportunity to provide a local pathway.

Practicum Opportunities

If all aspects are taken into account, there are substantial resources for education and training in Swan Hill and current building activities together with proposed additions offer further opportunities. All these resources need to be made available to all relevant learners. Many work-places also offer opportunities for learners to have access to advanced technology. This aspect could be developed further and many employers are willing to be involved in opportunities for training. Hughes, 2000

Practicum placement is a component of the requirement of qualification within many tertiary courses. A principal component of the model is the delivery of the practicums within the region.

The practicum is not only a requirement of the many qualifications, it provides three other opportunities:

- Introduction of the student to the opportunities and career paths within the region,
- Opportunity for the host businesses or organisations to introduce themselves to a pool of potential professional staff, and
- Financial support to the organisation for the placement.

There are significant opportunities for the practical placement of students with business and organisations within the region.

The access to practicum placements is competitive between universities. They are in the practice of providing financial support to businesses to place students.

Local business should therefore explore the opportunity for supporting the experience of student placements.

There is also an obligation on the regional employers. Practicums is their opportunity to ensure that the experience of the student or trainee is one which convinces them that the region can offer an attractive career path.

The opportunity provided by practicum placements to the region is such that to gain full value from it, the broader community including local government, industry and business should work collectively to engage the student so as to maximise the

positive experience in all that the region has to offer including career, lifestyle and cultural opportunity.

A number of local employers are already committed to provision of practicum places.

The Swan Hill Rural City already has a scholarship system in place and is committed to providing practicums for a range of scholarship students.

The Swan Hill District Hospital and Kerang Hospital each have strong relationships with universities to provide internships.

All colleges across the region engage trainee students. Tyrrell College has already benefited from active engagement in traineeships, having subsequently recruited a significant number of the trainees who go through the college.

It is likely that the presence of a university would encourage significant and currently untapped practicum capacity across the region.

A regional example of the use of practicums to attract professionals is the delivery of Primary School Teaching at LaTrobe in Mildura.

The first year of the course is delivered at the campus in Mildura. The subsequent two years are delivered at the Bendigo campus. The practicums are then delivered by agreement within the schools of the Mildura region.

This has proved a successful strategy with over 90 of the participants being employed locally over the couple of years of the program.

OPERATIONAL/MANAGEMENT ISSUES

Traditionally the costs of operation and management of university provision is borne by the delivering university. The proposed model requires a different approach because it is undertaking a number of the tasks in the provision of the programs. The role of the universities remains in the development and delivery of the programs.

In the first instance the structure of the Universities Centre is a co-ordinator and an office.

Facilities

To deliver the model proposed, the facilities required are an administrative office and teaching/study facilities.

The administration would require a shopfront, capable of accommodating an Administrator and support staff as needed.

To aid the community's identification with this as a new initiative, and not "just" an extension of what is already available across the region, it is strongly recommended that the Universities Centre have its own premises, which would logically be leased office space within Swan Hill.

In the short term, the principal teaching and study facilities required are lecture and study space and library access. Given that the students would be functioning with external studies and local tutors, the major requirements would be for tutorial support rooms and telecommunications facilities.

These can be delivered at any location across the region, where the demand for the course is most relevant, and where the IT capacity is appropriate.

The critical aspect of the delivery of lectures is the availability of video-conferencing facilities. These are currently available in Swan Hill at Sunraysia TAFE, Swan Hill and MacKillop Colleges the Swan Hill Hospital and Employment Works. The only facilities outside Swan Hill are at the Kerang Hospital and Balranald Central School.

All of the Victorian schools are in the process of upgrade to 4mb internet capacity as a state government initiative. This will provide adequate internet access from each of the Colleges.

However the best facility is at Balranald Central School. Having been established by the New South Wales state government as a Distance Education Universities Centre, it has a video conferencing facility supported by 10mb of IT capacity.

Access is required to these facilities out of routine "school hours". A number of these institutions have indicated that they would make their facilities available on an agreed financial basis.

Library access for the students would be by agreement with the municipal libraries at Swan Hill principally, but also later if needed at Kerang.

Both municipal libraries in Swan Hill and Kerang have recently relocated to new premises. The Swan Hill library already provides the library service for the students

of the new Sunraysia TAFE facility and has indicated that it has the capacity and is keen to provide a base for the regional university library.

Management

The most cost-effective strategy to manage a Universities Centre would be to appoint a Co-ordinator who would act as a facilitator, co-ordinator and broker for university programs in the region. The Co-ordinator would report to the Board.

The main functions of the Co-ordinator are to:

- Oversee the operation and management of the Universities Centre
- Ensure the rolling review of priority courses is undertaken.
- Present information as required for the Board's direction.
- Manage the process of selection of universities to deliver the determined courses.
- Manage the relationship between the Universities Centre and the delivering universities.
- Co-ordinate the courses in conjunction with the delivering university(s).
- Negotiate with staff of the partner university and TAFE in the development of programs and Pathways.
- Ensure that there is adequate staff engaged to operate the Universities Centre and provide the required services.
- Ensure that the enrolment and student administration functions are delivered.
- Negotiate access to the necessary teaching/study facilities.
- Develop and undertake the Universities Centre's promotional program.

Given that the success of the project will rely heavily on the ability of the Co-ordinator to manage and deliver the model, in order to attract a person of the required capacity, it is likely that a full time salary of approximately \$100,000 (including oncost) will need to be offered.

Initially it may be appropriate for the Co-ordinator role to be part time. This is however not ideal as it will be necessary to attract a competent and experienced person to the position.

Geraldton commenced with a full time position supported by two other staff. However as they commenced with only 20 places, their funding from those places were able to cover only approximately 50% of the full cost of operation. Geraldton was able to gain support funding from the state government to cover the balance of costs until the volume of places provided adequate funding.

The Collaboration and Restructural Reform Fund of the federal government is an appropriate source of operational funding support.

Once the Universities Centre is self sufficient on an ongoing basis, additional staff would be engaged to provide management services and administrative support for the students.

Operational Costs

Currently the lease cost for a small shopfront of approximately 120m² in Swan Hill is approximately \$8,000 per annum.

Operational and office costs, of approximately \$50,000 for printing, publicity, and office management and telecommunications costs are assumed to be required to operate the Universities Centre.

It is estimated the cost of access to the lecture/study facilities is \$40,000 per annum. While it is possible some institutions may make their facilities available on a gratis basis, it is appropriate to assume a suitable commercial arrangement will prevail.

The total cost to the Universities Centre of operation of the model is estimated to initially be \$190 - 200,000 per annum.

Funding

The principal source of operational funding to enable the Universities Centre to operate and provide resources to universities to facilitate the courses is the allocation of fully federally funded university places.

Geraldton have found the ratio of costs to deliver each university position to be approximately 50:50 between the universities delivering the programs and their local costs.

They have adopted a model of retaining 48.5% of the federal funding to support the costs of their Universities Centre. The balance of 51.5% is provided to the university to engage lecturers and tutors and deliver the course.

The courses themselves will need to be self supporting hence the revenue a student earns for the university will need to be sufficient to provide the course.

Currently each university place is funded to approximately \$11,000, depending on the course whether there is any loading for rural location.

The Universities Centre would therefore need at least thirty-five places initially to provide the \$190,000 to enable its establishment and would need to increase places over the first 3 to 4 years to ensure its ongoing viability.

It is likely that the partner university would be keen to explore course options for full fee paying students within the region. The students of the Universities Centre could be a mixture of HECS supported and full fee paying students; however in the initial instance it is to be assumed that any full fee paying students will be a bonus.

With realistic funding of places from the Commonwealth, the Universities Centre could ultimately be self-supporting. However for the first three or four years, additional resources may be required for establishment of the concept. It is most unlikely that these would come from the universities since their inclination in recent years has been to centralise functions and activities. It is appropriate to assume that unless the university had a strategic aim to provide subsidy to the region, then it would require the courses to be cost neutral at worst.

Support for Koorie study in undergraduate courses at university is available through the Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ITAS), a tuition scheme funded by DETYA. This scheme will provide funding of \$31.5 million over the next four years, supporting about 4,000 students each year.

A further opportunity for funding support for Koorie study is the Parent School Partnership Initiative under DEST.

The principal source of potential funding is the Collaboration and Restructural Reform. This is a federal program aimed at supporting innovative partnerships between industry, VET and universities. It has a particular focus on regional development.

This fund would be a candidate for an application to undertake a pilot project to further develop the model with an emphasis on the partnership between the regional industry needs, the articulation opportunities and the appropriate university courses, and include funding support for initial operational costs including staffing and rental of premises.

The Fund is a pool of \$30 - \$40million over a period of 3 - 4 years. The first round has closed with the results now on the Minister's desk awaiting announcement. The next round of applications will follow about November 2005.

Student Fees

The student fees will be similar to those already paid to attend university campuses.

The significant saving for the student and family is in the reduced accommodation and living costs.

An opportunity to reduce the cost of attendance to the students is by provision of scholarships by local business or organisations. Geraldton has been successful in attracting scholarships from seven local organisations.

While there are already a number scholarships provided by local organisations to local students undertaking university study out of the region, it is likely that this would increase as a result of the local ownership of the model.

University Foundation

As a mechanism to raise funds to support the initiative and to increase interest in and develop strategies to attract universities to participate with the community, the Steering Committee should consider establishing a University Foundation.

Capital Development

The focus of the model is to utilise existing facilities, such that all costs remain operational. However it may be necessary to access some capital funding to provide access by the regional facilities to the Australian Academic Research Network (AREN) which is an IT network linking universities providing interactive and information services required to run a program.

Inclusion of this regional IT upgrade should be considered in the application to the Collaboration and Restructural Reform Fund.

GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE

Fundamental to the structure of the Universities Centre are governance arrangements that provide community input and accountability and allow flexibility to respond to a changing environment.

It is important that the local community 'owns' the concept. The facility and the opportunities are going to have to be supported by the people of the region to have any chance of viability.

It is recommended that a Board of Management be created, termed the Central Murray Universities Centre Board of Management.

The Board should largely comprise local people, and include representation of the community, regional industry and education providers.

It is recommended that the Chair be an independent community member, not necessarily of the region.

A possible structure of the Board is members representing the following community and education groups and organisations:

- the regional secondary colleges
- TAFE providers
- local industry
- local government
- the partner university(s)

The Board would be responsible for the overall function of the Universities Centre, setting policy and ensuring that the overall interests of the region's various communities are represented.

The Board would make the overall selection of the delivering universities and courses to be offered.

One of the principal functions of the Board would be to appoint the Manager, who would be directly responsible to the Board for the operation of the Universities Centre and the delivery of the programs.

Governing Principles

Apart from the usual aspects of fiduciary responsibility the philosophy of the Universities Centre would need to include:

- There would need to be a commitment to accepted academic principles and standards;
- The Universities Centre must have credibility and legitimacy within the academic community;
- Students accepted must be at the same academic standards as in the other campuses of the participating university; and
- The content and expected outcomes of the courses will be similar to courses delivered to other campuses of the university.

OBTAINING UNIVERSITY PLACES

The State Governments have constitutional responsibility for higher education and coordinate higher education provision across their states. It is the State Governments that has approved the establishment of the universities and set the legislation under which the universities operate within each state.

Responsibility for the public funding of universities has been with the Federal Government since 1974.

Although the states are consulted on which institutions and which fields of study should receive funded places, they are allocated generally within a ratio predetermined for each state. Victoria and New South Wales have long demonstrated that their allocation per person is significantly below other states, particularly Queensland, South Australia and Western Australia.

There is a national cap on the number of new places available, based on the funding approved by federal cabinet.

Minister Nelson has secured funding for a package of 39,100 new university places to be allocated over four years. The initial allocation was taken up in 2005, with the next to be made in 2006 to be available in the 2007 university year.

The next allocation is to include 2,800 places. It is anticipated the government will call for submissions from institutions for those places early in 2006, possibly February/March.

The process of allocation involves the universities bidding for places, within a very competitive process.

Current policy is that the places are attached to an institution, rather than to a geographic area, however the department is amenable to allocation of places which are banked by the university to deliver determined courses to specified regions. Nor is there any apparent impediment to whether the delivering university is based within the state into which it is delivering programs.

There are a number of regional campuses across Australia, so it is not unusual that universities seek places specifically or assign places to deliver selected courses to those campuses. The distinction is that the identification of need and delivery of those places are controlled by the universities. There is no or minimal control by the community.

Even in the Geraldton model possession of the places did not pass to the regional community. They were retained by DETYA which oversaw the tendering process to determine the deliverer of the places. At the end of the tendering process the places were still allocated to the successful universities, but with the express purpose of delivery of determined courses to the geographic area.

It is this concept where the universities compete to deliver a number of places for courses, determined by the community, to a geographic region which makes the Geraldton model stand alone.

RECOMMENDED STRATEGY

The success of any approach to the two levels of government to get university education delivered directly into the region will be enhanced by gaining solid community support for the concept.

This model relies upon the partner university being able to put a submission before the Minister on the behalf of the region. However the allocation of new places is eagerly sought by all universities.

While there is some urgency to present directly to Federal Education Minister Nelson, any decision to allocate places to the partner university for delivery to the region is going to be done within the consideration of submissions mid next year.

It would assist the submission considerably if the Minister is aware that the proposal has strong local community and political support.

In the *Strategy For Tertiary Education In Shepparton, 2005 – 2009*, developed by Stride Consulting, it was suggested that the following factors had an influence on the minimal allocation of new HECS places to Shepparton, despite Council already having developed and presented their “University City Strategy” to the federal government:

- Perception that there was insufficient institutional enthusiasm or commitment on the part of universities to Shepparton proposals
- Insufficient demand and/or marketing of Shepparton as a tertiary education destination
- Insufficient pressure from the community and business in support of the tertiary education providers operating in the region
- Insufficient engagement between the community – especially business in the region – and the institutions.

Experience throughout the development of this report is that while there has been general support from the community for university presence within the region, there has either been confusion about what the project is attempting to achieve, or how it would be delivered.

There has been a perception that it must mean a university campus being built. This has prompted negative comment along the lines of Swan Hill and Kerang being too small for a university campus. It has been difficult to engage the community without a proposal for them to comprehend and discuss.

Hence as an initial step, the Working Party should adopt a model for endorsement by the MMLLEN Board.

This report offers a recommended model of delivery of university programs into the region.

It is recommended that a dual path be followed, leading to the submission for places:

1. Development of a refined pilot model of delivery
2. Establishing community and education sector support for the broad model

1. Pilot Model of Delivery

It is recommended that an application be put to the Collaboration and Structural Reform Fund for funding to refine and develop the model and to then provide initial operational funding to support its commencement.

The initial stage of developing the details of a pilot model of innovative university education delivery, incorporating partnerships to deliver pilot articulation programs, includes:

- Refinement of the priority courses,
- Establishment of the number of places to be requested,
- Development of a range of articulation opportunities,
- Formalisation of any university partnering arrangements,
- Creation of appropriate regional training and business partnerships which would support the model,
- Establishment of the facility arrangements, and
- Establishment of the office accommodation options

The second component to the funding application is initial operational funding to enable appointment of the Facilitator and establishment of the Universities Centre shopfront.

The development of the partnerships to deliver the model is regarded as an ideal application of the Fund for a pilot project to deliver university study to a regional area.

The application must be made through a university; hence the establishment of the partner university is a prerequisite of this step.

This fund also comes out of Minister Nelson's office, with the next applications anticipated to be in November 2005.

Support by the minister for this application would give the ultimate request for university places a significant boost.

2. Gain support from the community and a range of parties for the broad model

Local Government - The federal and state governments will expect to see community support for the proposal, at least through the local Councils.

Regional Colleges and TAFE's - The endorsement of the regional education providers is essential. The proposal relies heavily on access to their facilities.

Local industry/business community - An important aspect of the argument is the economic advantage it can offer to the region. Hence the business community is a significant ally in the debate.

Indigenous community representatives - The indigenous community is a significant area of need, particularly within the Swan Hill area of the region.

Youth representative group - The significant part of this proposal is the opportunity it provides to the youth in undergraduate study. Hence support from that sector is important to the success of the proposal.

All political representatives - It will be essential that the representation of the proposal be carried to the state then federal government through them.

State Education Ministers - The proposal requires the support at state government level to succeed at the federal minister's level.

The state governments generally set the focus of tertiary study in each state and they are given opportunity to comment on the location and focus of HECS placements for their state.

These two processes should be completed by February 2006 to ensure the partner university is in a position to make a community supported submission for federally funded university places.

Critical Timelines

The ultimate aim of being able to put a submission before the federal government for university places during the early part of 2006, for allocation of places for the 2007 study year, relies on achievement of a number of critical steps. The following are a suggested sequence of achievements to guide the priorities of the Working Party;

2005

August - Adoption of the preferred model

September/October - Establishment of University Partner

October/November - Submission for Innovation and Structural Reform Funding by University Partner.

December/February - Development of refined model of delivery, priority courses

2006

February/March - Submission for places to the federal government by the University Partner

Mid year - Allocation of places by federal government

August - Establishment of Universities Centre Board of Management

September - Engagement of Universities Centre facilitator

September - Establishment of Universities Centre facility in Swan Hill (and Kerang)

November - Advertisement of courses available

2007

January - Enrolment of students

January - Engagement of local tutors and staff required by the university

February/March - Commencement of university studies within region

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Appendix 1

FEASIBILITY STUDY BRIEF

1. BACKGROUND

In the Mid Murray Region (defined by the LGA's of Swan Hill, Gannawarra and Wakool) there is considerable discussion and interest in the need for tertiary education opportunities for people in this area. In recognition of the need for greater access to tertiary education opportunities the Murray Mallee Local Learning and Employment Network has auspiced the Mid Murray Higher Education Working Party (MMHEWP).

This working party has been given the responsibility to investigate the opportunities and potential for the delivery of more university programs in the region at both undergraduate and post graduate level.

Issues that have been discussed include a possible University Centre of Central Murray based in Swan Hill, but with the capability to offer innovative and flexible delivery modes throughout the shires of Gannawarra and Wakool, thus providing access to tertiary courses.

A University Centre model in the region may include a range of delivery modes, comprising lecture and tutorials, person-to-person in the workplace or on campus; on line and flexible delivery and tele and videoconference based delivery and other options. The key feature is that students are able to complete a degree in this region on a full-time or part-time basis by attending a University Centre.

There has been discussion in the Region about a University Centre providing undergraduate tertiary studies in areas including but not limited to business management, nursing and education. This discussion and interest has articulated dissatisfaction with existing university pathways for people within the region and with a perception that existing pathways are limited and do not sufficiently meet the needs of students and community members who may wish to upskill.

2. INVITATION

The Mid Murray Higher Education Working Party seeks tenders to undertake a feasibility study to investigate models for a University Centre in the Central Murray Region and provide recommendations for further action.

3. SCOPE

Project Objective

To recommend the approach that would:

1. Lead to the establishment of a university Centre servicing the shires of Swan Hill, Gannawarra and Wakool.
2. Quantify the demand for undergraduate & postgraduate programs.
3. Best meet the needs for tertiary education in this region.

PROJECT BRIEF

The following objectives have been established for the feasibility study

Objective 1 - To increase understanding of the context and existing initiatives for tertiary education within the Mid Murray Region

Objective 2 - To outline and document existing links and tertiary course provision in the Mid Murray Region by Universities.

Objective 3 - To identify, quantify and validate issues related to the allocation of Commonwealth HECS positions to the Central Murray Region and related funding issues.

Objective 4 - To identify and outline possible University courses that could be delivered at a University Centre of Central Murray.

Objective 5 - Compare innovative models for service delivery of identified courses or Study available through a University Centre of Central Murray.

Objective 6 - To Identify the community support required to support a University Centre of Central Murray.

Objective 7 - To identify possible locations of a University Centre of Central Murray.

Objective 8 - To provide a report with recommendations for future action.

8.1. Provide a report, which will include:

- An overview of the scope of the project
- An executive summary
- An outline of the context and existing initiatives for tertiary education within the region as stated in Objective 1.
- An outline of existing links and tertiary course provision in the region by Universities as stated in Objective 2.
- An outline which identifies, quantifies and validates regional and systemic issues as stated in Objective 3.
- An outline, which identifies, outlines and compares models for the provision of a university Centre as stated in Objective 4.
- An outline which identifies the processes used and the results of surveys to identify the market for the preferred models as stated in Objective 5.
- An analysis of the market for the preferred models including well presented analysis of the various surveys required in Objective 6
- An analysis of the possible locations of a University Centre of Central Murray.
- Recommendations for future action, including proposed best models.
- A list of references.

- An Appendix of survey tools.

8.2. Make public presentations of the draft report to the Mid Murray Higher Education Working Party, and final report and key findings to invited stakeholders.

NOTE: It is expected that the Feasibility Study will indicate the sustainability for the provision of University courses at a University Centre of Central Murray. The Working Party may use this report as the basis for the preparation of a Business Plan for the operation of a University Centre. This project would be subject to a separate tender process.

Project Management

The project will be managed by the Murray Mallee LLEN and monitored by Mid Murray Higher Education Working Party. The tenderer will be expected to provide financial and progress reports on the project and a final report outlining outcomes achieved.

Project Outputs

The project output expected are:

- A report as outlined in Objective 5
- A report and presentations as outlined in Objective 8
- Surveys as outlined in Objective 6

Appendix 2

Education within the Region

Secondary Education

The Swan Hill/Kerang region includes eight secondary colleges/schools.

They include the Swan Hill College, MacKillop College, Kerang Technical/High School, Balranald Central School, Manangatang P12 College, Tooleybuc Central School, Barham High School and Tyrrell College in Sea Lake.

These schools, with the exception of the Balranald Central School and Barham High School, form the Mallee Vocational Consortium.

The Mallee Vocational Consortium is an interesting and valuable example of collaboration for the Swan Hill region and some outlying areas. It has built on the work at Swan Hill Secondary College and on new emphases at schools such as Tyrrell College and Manangatang P-12 College. The VETIS courses at the two latter schools are important in that students do not need to travel too early in their career in order to commence their vocational training. It is an encouraging feature that Kerang Technical High School is a member of this consortium, as this offers a wider field of collaboration for the Swan Hill region. Hughes, 2000

The two Swan Hill colleges are significantly the largest and draw on students from across the region. The smaller colleges provide more local opportunities, with the Balranald and Tooleybuc Central Schools and Manangatang and Tyrrell Colleges providing integrated education from prep to year 12.

	Year 7 - 12	Year 11	Year 12
Swan Hill College	913	118	91
MacKillop College	600	95	64
Kerang Tech/High School	485	78	39
Tyrrell College	134	21	15
Tooleybuc Central School	77	10	9
Barham High School	255	22	27
Balranald Central School	115	13	10
Manangatang P12 College	68	9	7
Total Students	2,647	366	262

Some colleges also have a number of students studying at secondary level either full time or part time via distance education. Balranald Central School has the largest number with 170 such 'off campus' students.

Technical and Further Education

Both Sunraysia TAFE based in Mildura and Bendigo Regional Institute of TAFE (BRIT) deliver courses directly into the region.

Sunraysia TAFE delivers across the region, having built a new campus in Swan Hill. While it does not have a facility, it delivers courses into Kerang through the agency of Kerang Learning Centre via a memorandum of agreement.

Sunraysia TAFE offers a range of certificate, diploma and advanced diploma studies in the following fields:

- Business / Management
- Information Technology
- Hospitality
- Accounting & Financial Services
- Automotive
- Engineering and Electrical
- Occupational Health & Safety
- Building and Plumbing
- Primary Industries
- Environmental Science
- Arts and Community Education
- Health and Community Services
- Visual Arts
- Koori Training

The core delivery of these courses is into Mildura, with a reduced range delivered out of the Swan Hill campus, depending on the identified demand.

The delivery into Kerang is based on student contact hours for specific courses which display a demand and the opportunity to relocate Swan Hill places. Certificate studies in Aged Care and Assessment & Workplace Training comprising approximately 8000 contact hours are being currently provided in Kerang.

Elements of the courses already contain articulation accreditation into further university study. There is however no opportunity to utilise that articulation within the region.

The most striking example of such an opportunity not realised is that Division 2 Nursing is delivered at Swan Hill, yet the further step to upgrade to Division Nurse Qualification currently sees students studying through and travelling to Uni SA, and LaTrobe University both in Mildura and Bendigo.

Sunraysia TAFE has a strong relationship with the Latrobe University, which also has a campus in Mildura, where it has an arrangement to deliver some articulation opportunities.

The BRIT courses delivered in to Kerang were previously managed from Echuca and delivered from a facility located within the grounds of the Technical/High School.

BRIT has now entered, from 30 May 2005, a formal arrangement with the Kerang Learning Centre to provide joint administration and delivery of courses. These will be delivered from any of the joint facilities of the partnership.

The courses now on offer by BRIT in Kerang include

- Certificate IV in Business
- Certificate II in Information Technology
- Certificate II in Business
- Short courses in Hospitality and Farm Chemical Handling

There is currently a review of the co-ordination and delivery of TAFE courses within the Kerang area, involving both BRIT and Sunraysia TAFE. That review is investigating the establishment of an entity (alliance, committee, association or company) which is governed by a community-based Council or Board to oversee all of the post-compulsory education and training services for the local community.

Other Training/Education Centres

The region has a significant number of registered training organisations, including Murray Mallee Training, Murray Ace, Employment Works, Swan Training, MADEC, Balranald Outback and the Kerang Learning Centre

These organisations provide an adequate opportunity across the region to train at certificate level.

Some also provide exam facilities for university students.

On an opportunistic basis, university level courses may be provided by them. These courses though not part of a planned or integrated program.

Appendix 3

The Case for Tertiary Education into the Region

Loss of Youth

A major issue for concern for the region, like all rural communities is the ongoing loss of its youth. The region has large gaps in its population for the 15 - 34 age group compared with that found at the state level which appears partly to be linked with young people leaving the region for further study or work.

Due to the dominance of the agricultural industry, there are generally less career options for women across region; hence they are becoming increasingly less represented in the 15-24 age group.

“As there is no university located in the region the pursuit of higher education appears to explain, at least in part, why men outnumber women among young people aged 15 – 24 years in the Gannawarra region.” Selby Smith, 2004

The region already suffers from the common problem of an ageing population. According to the most recent census figures, it generally has 17.8% of the population over 65 compared with a state average of 12.8%.

With the influx of older people as Swan Hill in particular becomes an increasing focus for retirement living, this imbalance will be increased.

The ageing community in itself creates an increasing need for welfare and allied health professional support.

Local Leadership

While there is considerable intellectual capacity in the older members of the community, the region is concerned that the continued youth drain is compromising the future leadership capacity. The increased ability to study at a higher level and to remain within the region would reinforce that intellectual capital and safeguard the leadership capacity of the region.

Swan Hill is typical of many rural communities where opportunities for young people are restricted severely by their location. This restricts community development, a restriction which is much more damaging in a society where technology plays such an important role. Hughes, 2000

There is a generally low level of formal qualifications held across the region. The LLEN data of 2004 indicated that in the MMLLEN area, 37.1% of residents aged 15 and over have some type of qualification, compared with 46.3% in Victoria as a whole. The most common qualification is a certificate, having been attained by 15 per cent of the population.

Approximately 5% of the community hold a Diploma, Graduate or Advanced Diploma or Graduate Certificate against a Victorian average of 20.6% and 22.6% in New South Wales.

A further 5% of the MMLLEN population have a Bachelor or Post-graduate Degree or higher. This compares to the portion of the population holding higher qualifications in Victorian of 14.2% and 13.5% in New South Wales.

As the MMLLEN region includes Swan Hill and Kerang but not the Wakool or Balranald areas, the Central Murray region qualifications can be expected to be less as a percentage.

Low levels of Diplomas, Degrees and Graduate Certificates might suggest that areas such as management and technological advancement may be under resourced and may limit the community's ability to respond to change. Hughes, 2000

The Equity Issue

The views of the current year 11 and 12 students of the eight colleges are very diverse. While many wish to leave at the first possible opportunity, as part of their legitimate life experience, others do not wish to leave but feel they have no option.

Indeed, for many there is no option as they seek career, work or study opportunities which would not be available within the region.

Anecdotally, there appears to be some degree of embarrassment caused to those students who do not wish to leave, or who wish to leave "under their own terms".

It is apparent that whether or not they left at a later date for work, travel, or any number of reasons, access to university study within the region would offer them one more legitimate option in their life choices.

Ian Dobson, in the paper "University Connections to Regional Engagement: New and Old Perspectives", July 2003 concluded that '*Young people from regional Victoria are under represented within the ranks of Victoria's university students.....*' and raised the question of the issue being one of equity.

He further concluded that "*...regional Victorians do not receive an equitable share of scarce Commonwealth subsidised university places.*"

It is possible that some regional young people are put off considering university training because of limited access to university places in their vicinity.

The policy options available include more financial support to prospective regional students so that they can overcome financial barriers, perhaps tied to additional university places set aside for regional applicants." Dobson, 2003

Minister Kosky stated that in 2002 "*...21,500 Victorian students were eligible to enter a university but could not gain a place. Victoria has 40 per cent of the applicants across Australia who do not receive a university place.*"

"There continues to be an inequity of access to higher education for people living in rural and remote locations. School retention rates in rural areas are lower than in the cities and this results in lower rates of transfer to higher education. Even so, regional and rural higher education provision is meagre in comparison to that in metropolitan areas – on average there are only 634 fully-funded university places per 100,000 regional Victorians, while in metropolitan Melbourne there are 1045 university places per 100,000 of population. A concerning consequence of this comparatively low

provision is that almost a third of regional and rural applicants to universities are unsuccessful in attaining a place.

There are obvious differences in proximity between metropolitan and regional residents and their closest higher education institutions. This disadvantages rural and regional residents already in the workforce or with family commitments who are unable to travel long distances to undertake study. Distance education is not always an appropriate substitute for face-to-face learning.” Kosky, 2002

As noted by the state government, distance education, particularly where there is no administrative, tutorial or colleague support is a very difficult exercise and one which is not an option for many people. There is anecdotal evidence of people within the region who, on wishing a career change, have had to forfeit their employment to relocate to a centre offering on-campus study, even though their future career is available within the region.

Some of these people remain living in the region but are forced to live away from home during semesters. Others need to relocate their families.

This is a penalty which the metropolitan person who can continue to work while studying part time on-campus, need not suffer.

“Concern was expressed over the exodus of so many young people from the region after Year 12. This was very costly to parents and an economic loss to Swan Hill. The total cost of maintaining a young student away from home was estimated as \$15,000 per year. While it was recognised that it would not be possible to retain all young people in Swan Hill, and that many would gain from opportunities of education elsewhere, it was also felt that many would gain from more tertiary education opportunities in the region. The idea of a locally delivered bridging year for some university education was felt to be very worthwhile if a selection of first year courses could be available.” Hughes, 2000

Professional Staff Shortages

Despite the growth in the agricultural and manufacturing industries, with the resultant increased need for support and service business, local business continues to experience significant difficulty in attracting professionally qualified staff.

As an example, at any time, the Swan Hill Rural City would be searching to engage qualified Engineers, Human Resource Officers, Planning Officers, Child Carers, Pre-school Teachers, Environmental Health Officers, Accountants or Maternal & Child Health Nurses, having either great difficulty or ultimately giving up the search.

As a consequence, many organisations now engage staff or head hunt existing staff with the capacity to develop into the professional level required and provide opportunity to study to gain the required qualification.

This creates two further problems, being the need to support the staff member through study and to cover the professional requirements of the role during this developmental process. Organisations need to duplicate staff by engaging external experienced and qualified services, where available, to provide the service whilst the trainee is gaining both the qualification and experience.

The successful recruitment of qualified staff by organisations within a rural area is often by way of robbing each other of existing staff. As the larger organisations hold the main attraction to professional staff within the region, by gaining some of them from the smaller organisations and businesses puts these in an even worse position to attract replacement staff. Hence the ongoing recruitment difficulties within the rural areas are worsened.

As a response to the employment dilemma, a number of local businesses and organisations have developed scholarship initiatives to support and encourage study in locally relevant fields. Among those, the Swan Hill Rural City has instituted a scholarship program, where local students wishing to continue on to courses relevant to the needs of Council are provided financial support related directly to their study costs.

Council also guarantees casual employment within the relevant department during study breaks to provide the practical experience requirement, together with providing additional financial support.

However there is anecdotal evidence of disincentive for organisations to provide opportunity or encourage staff to study due to the time lost to the organisation in block study releases.

As the block releases inevitably means staying away from home, the example was often cited of difficulty in finding support to care for children while the parent was absent, or the business suffering either increased cost or inability to find fill-in staff or loss of production while the employee was absent.

While the two campuses of LaTrobe at Mildura and Bendigo are only 2 - 2.5 hours from Swan Hill, when block release is undertaken, each is a stay-over destination. In effect they are no more accessible than Melbourne, a further 1.5 hours travel.

The region is a stronghold of small business, each of which may not be able to justify the professional staff they need, many having only sufficient work for portion of a position. The offer of portion of a position is not likely to attract qualified professionals to the region. These businesses rely on their part time professional needs being supplied either by external agencies.

The example of the difficulties of staffing the smaller Colleges was cited, in that they cannot justify the full engagement of staff in specialised fields such as outdoor education. They find it necessary to support the qualification of staff delivering these subjects into another field to be able to attract or retain them.

The Colleges expressed frustration at the attrition rate of their staff who return to metropolitan areas earlier than desired to enable them to more easily continue to study.

As one Principal observed "It is difficult enough to get them here without the inducement to leave earlier than necessary, because they can't study here."

The agriculture sector is the major economic driver, and together with the service industries supporting it, is the major source of employment within the region. However due to the changing financial viability of the family farm, coupled with the recent drought impact on farming incomes, there is increased incentive and need for the farming partnership, principally through the spouse, to find off-farm employment to supplement the income.

The experience is also that with the increased mobility of the community, many of the spouses of farmers do not now consider themselves to be committed full time to the farming operation. They look naturally to either continue or engage in their own career.

This provides an opportunity to offer those farming families and others additional career choices and is fertile ground for inducement for the partner to study in a field needed within the region.

There is no reason why some cannot study to provide a number of the pre-school teachers, accountants, business managers or environment health officers that the region is searching for, providing the opportunity through training up its own professional people, already with a commitment to the region.

The evidence of the importance of providing training for the local people is the Charles Sturt University experience at Dubbo. Of the approximately 500 students studying on campus, nearly 92% are from the local region.

The campus provides studies in Primary and Early Childhood Teaching, Business (Accounting), Nursing, Social Welfare and IT. It is reported that the majority of the students remain in the region to work professionally once qualified

It is highly unlikely that these professions would be options considered by local residents with the capacity to study and change or develop a career unless they are able to study and qualify locally.

This could be reflected in the significant interest to the MMLLEN survey from mature aged residents.

“Increasing higher education participation rates in older age groups, most of whom will be in the workforce and already dealing with the pressures of balancing work and family responsibilities, represents a major challenge for higher education institutions in terms of course entry criteria, program structure and the flexibility of delivery.”
Kosky, 2002

The Cost of Tertiary Education

The cost of sending a student away to university, including study costs and living and travel expenses is \$18,000 - \$20,000 each year, a total cost of up to \$80,000 plus HECS for a four year degree.

Despite the flourishing development of the agricultural industry across the region, the socio-economic capacity of its population remains one of the lowest in the state.

The median weekly family income is within the range of \$700 - \$799 for the Swan Hill and Gannawarra municipalities and from \$600 - \$699 for the other municipal areas.

This compares to the median weekly family income for both Victoria and New South Wales of \$800 - \$999.

From the 2001 census, 37% of families across the region have an annual income of less than \$36,400 (700/week).

The generally low level of family income across the region is highlighted by over 68% of families earning less than \$50,000 per annum.

Hence to send one student to university costs more than 50% of the annual income of over one third of the families across the region.

"It is likely that the rising costs to consumers of higher education, combined with the availability of relatively inexpensive fee borrowing schemes for 'full fee' courses as well as HECS courses, will at some stage result in increased provision of higher education outside metropolitan areas. For example on figures that have been calculated for Shepparton, it could be substantially less expensive for a Shepparton student to do many full fee courses in Shepparton while living at home than to do the same courses as a HECS student in Melbourne while living in a shared house. On one scenario, the all up cost in Shepparton would be \$51,912, of which \$36,000 could be deferred, leaving a balance of \$15,912 costs that would need to be met while doing the course. The all up cost in Melbourne would be \$58,687, of which \$20,511 could be deferred leaving a balance of \$38,176 costs that would have to be met while doing the course. But (bearing) (sic) in mind that universities receive more income from full-fee students, entrepreneurs may start looking for opportunities to provide courses in major regional centres where they can attract students. Private providers may see opportunities, and competition could have an impact on fees. It may be anticipated that regional centres that can offer suitable teaching facilities with reasonably priced renting arrangements would have a headstart in attracting such providers." Stride, 2005

Regional Economic Development

The cost of tertiary study is a significant flow of finance out of the region and at the same time a significant contribution by the rural community to the economic wealth of the regional centres and cities.

A fully funded university place is worth approximately \$11,000 to the university. Together with the cost to the rural family for the balance of the study, the cost of accommodation and living expenses, it is estimated that the economic benefit to the university city is between 6 and 8 times the direct spend and value of the university place.

In fact, the import of rural students is an important economic advantage to the cities with university campuses. That advantage is though on the back of detriment to the rural communities, and continues the trend of soakage of resources, finance and expertise out of the rural community, to the benefit of the larger Universities Centres and cities.

While students within the major cities and regional centres experience the choice to remain at home or to relocate to university accommodation within their city that is currently not a choice open to rural students.

The capture of only a relative small number of university places, in the order of 40 – 50 to enable those students to study locally would collectively prevent the loss and provide a return to the region of between \$2.64million and \$3.52million.

- *There is a strong case for strengthening regional universities as part of an overall strategy of economic development in regional Victoria. Regional centres are likely to lag behind Melbourne unless they are able to compete*

with Melbourne or Sydney as sites for 'new economy' or internationally competitive hi-tech goods and services.

- *There is no sure pathway to such competitiveness. Nevertheless it is likely to involve high quality regional universities. They can assist regional competitiveness by providing training for local firms, by helping to keep talented graduates in the regions and by helping to create an urban culture likely to appeal to professional workers.*

New economy firms will be reluctant to invest in regional centres unless they believe they can attract and keep the high quality staff necessary for competitiveness in their field .

It will not be enough to just create additional university places. They will have to be places in professional fields likely to attract good student who could potentially assist the competitiveness of regional firms. Dobson, 2003

The principal areas of growth which underpin and are driving the economy is the agricultural based industry.

Increasingly this industry, including the "family farm", is becoming a high pressure business, requiring improved expertise in the technical aspects of growing the product, marketing, financial and business management.

The region has a high degree of export and with the horticultural sector being a very competitive and dynamic industry, there are entire industries which could undergo further training in marketing, financial management, business management.

Business management is becoming an increasingly important capacity required by the region.

"Swan Hill has a strong economy, with good growth prospects for the future built on the basis of specialised horticulture and agriculture, with strong support from the transport, tourism and service industries. Future success depends on advanced technology and high quality management. This requires people with high educational and vocational skills and an implementation of programs of training for all continuing staff."
Hughes, 2000

Significant corporate finance is flowing into the region in the development of major irrigation sector projects in high value crops, including a range of nuts, vegetables, grapes, olives and fruit.

Swan Hill, as the regional centre, is the hub of a significant and growing agricultural industry. The freeing up of trade of water irrigation entitlements has caused a significant amount of water to be traded into the region. Although there has been a loss of water from the Goulburn Murray Water irrigation region around Kerang, there has been a significant influx into the region downstream of Swan Hill.

As a consequence the region has experienced a relatively low unemployment rate of 4-5% for the past couple of years. The dilemma has been in attracting an adequate number of workers to support the developments underway.

The shortage of unskilled and semi-skilled labour has been addressed by the importing of transient workers or by use of specialist contract firms from outside the district. The shortage of skilled and professional people is a greater dilemma, requiring a different solution.

The Swan Hill Rural City has produced a paper outlining 14 major projects under planning or development within the Swan Hill, Wakool and Balranald municipalities. Ranging from ethanol plants to large corporate expansion of the almond and olive industries, it is estimated the investment in these 14 ventures alone will be \$410million.

The direct full-time equivalent jobs created by the fourteen projects is estimated to be 494, with a flow on of a further 723 regional jobs.

The Shire of Gannawarra similarly reports an estimated investment of \$155million into their agricultural and manufacturing industries over the next 5 years.

The benefits to industry and business and the economic flow on to the economy by the opportunity of higher study locally include:

- Improved middle management capacity.
- An incentive for innovation.
- Networking for research and finding new markets.
- Ability to remaining abreast of technology innovation.
- Opportunity to build the region as a centre of excellence, eg. Stone fruit.
- Introduces the region and businesses to universities, and vice versa.
- Ability to attract professionally qualified staff.

There is some frustration that local research needs are not being met. The region is becoming a particularly important supplier of horticultural and viticultural produce. Even though there are dryland cereal research facilities at Birchip and at Walpeup, and horticultural research at Mildura, there are sufficient issues particular to the region that there needs to be a focus on additional research which addresses local product and characteristics.

Current and Potential Initiatives/Opportunities

A number of initiatives in the area of education and training are being investigated or developed across the region.

An Applied Learning Centre concept is being developed, within which it is aimed to provide practical experience and learning within a real commercial entity.

The aim is to provide on-site learning within a business setting for a range of disciplines to support the training already provided by other Education providers. It aims also to create facilities within which additional education and commercial opportunities can be developed.

An application was made for funding to develop the first stage of the Learning Centre, based around an aquaculture business near Swan Hill, but was not successful.

A feasibility study and initial business case is soon to be the subject of a funding application to Regional development Victoria. This study would establish the industry training gaps and opportunities across the region, which could be supported within the Applied Learning Centre concept. The study would include the aquaculture option and also a hospitality business based around a restaurant training model in Hastings, on Western Port Bay.

The hospitality aspect of the training is one which is now central to the economy of the region, such that a Hospitality Reference Group has been formed within Swan Hill to support the development of the Learning Centre proposal.

Tourism has long been an aspect of the regional economy. The recent announcement of the purchase of Yanga Station by the New South Wales government was accompanied by the prediction of an additional 50,000 visitors each year to the Balranald region. This is an opportunity which education can capitalise on and has an obligation to support.

Horticulture is one of the major growth industries across the region. With this growth comes a range of training opportunities.

Investigations are currently underway by a company to establish a horticultural training centre within the area. The company focuses on international students with already a number on practical placement on farms within the Swan Hill/Lake Boga area.

The theoretical training is now done in Melbourne; however discussions are underway with a university to provide further study pathways in the event of the facility being based fully within the region.

With direct university involvement within the region, there is the opportunity to utilise the current growth within the irrigated agriculture area to develop a niche offering of study and research.

Together with the technical and professional requirements to sustain the growth in the irrigation enterprises, natural resource management offers broad opportunity to develop well articulated courses which are relevant to the region and give the opportunity to establish it as a 'Universities Centre of excellent' within that field.

The recent announcement where farmers are to be supported to undertake their roles of custodians of their land provides such an opportunity. The farmers will require training in a range of natural resource management issues, with an opportunity for articulation to higher learning, and a significant need for research into a range of practical issues which would support the knowledge of the landowners charged with the custodianship of their land.

Alcheringa Hostel in Swan Hill is finalising plans for the redevelopment of their 74 bed facility. The redevelopment will include up to an additional retiree living units.

With the already growing attraction of the river region to retirees, together with the state government's inclination to dampen the sea change growth of the coast, causing an increased interest in inland options, such developments as this will cause a significant expansion in the aged care and support industry across the region.

This brings the opportunity to develop training pathways within the aged care and service industry fields.

Internet Access

There is a clear need to consider issues associated with computer and internet access for people living in this region, including the availability of internet

services, the speed of services and the costs of accessing these service.

Computer use and internet access across the region in 2001 was relatively low, with 31.4% of homes utilising a computer and 27.8% utilising internet access.

These figures are significantly influenced by the Swan Hill and Kerang urban Universities Centres, with the use by the farming and smaller township communities being even less. The corresponding figures for the Shire of Wakool for the same period were 27.88% computer use and 25.70% internet access.

In some areas of the region there is no access to high bandwidth internet, requiring the use of either satellite or a combination of satellite/ISDN options.

Farm users dial-up for connection but speed depends on the distance from exchange. Access to internet is limited by dial-up restrictions in downloading significant sized documents.

This significantly impacts on the ability of many people across the region to undertake distance education as it is currently provided by universities.

The federal government Higher Bandwidth Incentive Scheme provides a subsidy to connection and the first 3 years usage costs, to increase access to broadband within the 4-6 km range from selected exchanges. A number of smaller towns within the region are now being enabled.

Telstra advises that the general growth of connections to ADSL across the state has been 2-4 times that which existed 12 months ago. The north west of Victoria has increased at 4 times over that period. This though reflects the low connection rate prior to the scheme.

Appendix 4

Demand for Tertiary Education in the Region

The Murray Mallee LLEN carried out a survey of the community during late 2004, seeking expressions of interest in undertaking undergraduate or postgraduate study within the region.

It sought also to discover what institutions those who were studying were enrolled with.

Promotion of the survey was done through the Swan Hill Guardian and through the regional and local radio outlets.

The coverage was principally across the Swan Hill area, without a significant concentration on the Kerang area.

The survey (Appendix 1) asked interested members of the community to respond to a series of questions posed in the newspaper and to email or post their response to the Swan Hill MMLLEN office.

The survey was seen to be directed toward the mature age student, and no promotion was done through the various schools of the district.

Despite the above, the response to an unstructured survey was very strong, with over 120 being received by the MMLLEN, highlighting a significant interest in the issue. From those over 100 returns indicated they would be interested in further study if it were offered locally.

This project sought to build on that initial exercise, in two ways:

- Direct survey of the year 11 and 12 students of the regional colleges.
- Direct discussion with the students.
- Follow up survey of the community generally.

Engagement by the colleges was very strong, with all readily providing information including their school and student profiles and facilitating access to their students for survey information and discussion.

1. Student Surveys

A survey (Attachment 2) was undertaken of all students within years 11 and 12 within the seven colleges.

The surveys were presented to the students either by the consultant or by school representatives. They were all done in structured classes, to ensure the maximum response.

While not all students were available, the return represents the majority of current students and almost all of those who have not made the decision they will not be going on to any form of further study.

College	Prefer to study within the region					
	Intending to continue study			Initial Year		
	Yes	No	Unsure	Yes	Year	No
Swan Hill College	75	15	42	47	24	61
MacKillop College	68	5	23	26	19	51
Tyrell College	21	3	2	4	6	16
Kerang Tech/High	43	0	21	28	13	23
Balranald Central	11	3	7	7	3	11
Manangatang P12	9	1	2	0	1	11
Tooleybuc Central	14	1	1	7	2	7
Barham High School	18	4	6	13	3	9
Total	259	32	104	132	71	192
Proportion of students surveyed	66%	8%	26%	33%	18%	49%

Total Surveyed 395

259 out of the 395 students (66%) surveyed intended to continue their study into tertiary, while another 104 were still unsure, only 32 did not wish to go on to tertiary studies. Most of these students not continuing indicated their desire to take up a trade.

Out of the entire 395 students surveyed, 203 (51%) indicated that they would prefer to conduct at least some their tertiary studies within their region. Of these, 65% would like to complete the course in the region while 35% preferred to begin locally before moving away.

The most desired area of study of those surveyed was in Education. Physical Education, Primary and Secondary School teaching were all mentioned frequently as the fields most preferred with 45 respondents (12% of overall).

Priority Courses	Respondents	%
Education	45	12%
Business	32	9%
Nursing/Health	25	7%
Engineering	17	5%

At the secondary level, the needs for further opportunity in Swan Hill are obvious. Year 12 students in the two Swan Hill colleges total 200 students in 2000, just 2/3 of the number who started in year 7. Many of the 100 students who left early have done so with no vocational qualifications. Of the 200 who remain, approximately 112 will be going elsewhere to university. In total for the region, almost 150 go on to university elsewhere. It is reasonable to assume that at least half of these would stay in Swan Hill, given appropriate opportunities. This may only amount to first year studies immediately but this would make a useful bridge to later university studies and would be a substantial financial saving to the Swan Hill community.

Difficult as it is to quantify with precision, the magnitude of the need for training and education opportunities in Swan Hill is apparent. Hughes, 2000

2. Direct Discussion

The schools then facilitated direct discussion with students.

Within the larger colleges, this discussion was with a representative sample of approximately twenty of the students from each year.

Within the smaller colleges, the entirety of the year 11 and 12 students was involved.

These discussions enabled direct feedback from the students regarding their wishes and views, enabling a more comprehensive understanding of the responses provided within the surveys. It also highlighted the issues which influenced the future intentions of the students.

Manangatang P12 College –

Of the 12 respondents, 11 stated they would prefer to leave the area to do their tertiary studies.

Reasons given for leaving were to meet new people and gain greater independence. They felt they would prefer to study elsewhere to have greater access to facilities, resources and choice of courses.

Being in a small town many of the students see leaving to a larger city area as their only option, given the opportunities of getting good employment are severely limited if they stay in the area. However their preference was to relocate to a regional Universities Centre as the change to Melbourne was daunting.

Balranald Central School –

Out of the 21 surveyed, 10 showed interest in studying in the area, 7 of those full time. The issues raised for staying at home were to have financial support, and they are comfortable with the area and the social life.

The initial year of study was favoured as they could save finance to go away later and be sure they had chosen the correct course.

Some local families do not have a university history, however nearly all students tend to leave to access study or work. The students choosing to move felt strongly there was little option but to move off the farm to earn a living, this can be attributed in part to the current drought.

Although anecdotal evidence is that all of the local students who defer eventually go on to study or work, they were concerned that if they do not go at the first opportunity, then they will be stuck in the area.

Kerang Technical/High School –

Only the students that were definite or still considering going to university completed the surveys. Kerang students represented the clearest majority willing to study in the area if possible.

The preference to stay at home related to:

- The initial stress of leaving

- New places and people all hit at once
- Comfortable with small town lifestyle
- Able to gain more finance, be sure of course
- Many have part time jobs.

There was the general feeling of wanting new experiences of people and places.

Tyrrell College –

Only 4 out of the 21 students that wish to go on to tertiary study are wanting to do the full course in the area. Factors causing this include that students see a need to get away to gain independence, employment opportunities and to experience life outside of their area.

The local first year was seen as a good option as allowed for some to mature before moving away, provided another year to gain finance, perhaps work.

The move would be less intimidating if they could be sure they had chosen the right course.

They suggested farming families now believe additional qualifications are valuable, even if remain in the area.

Tooleybuc Central School –

Tooleybuc Central students showed great interest in going on to tertiary studies but many chose not to study locally because of lack of opportunities in the area. This has been impacted on by the current drought and the falling perception of being able to successfully farm the land.

They felt the need to get away to experience a broader lifestyle.

They believe there was limited opportunity to study locally with few relevant courses at TAFE. They felt it unlikely they would return due to the limited number and range of jobs.

Loss of family contact and support would be the main reason to stay or for concern at moving away. Some are from family farms, hence felt a local commitment to not move away.

Believe distance education is very difficult as don't have any local support or anyone to discuss and work with.

Swan Hill & MacKillop Colleges –

Swan Hill based students have the most opportunities open to them to gain work to support them in studying in the area. Many students are already in casual employment and can use this work to help finance them through studies if they remain in the area. Financial restrictions again are a factor in preventing students from wanting to move away.

Students that do not wish to stay in the region are looking for a change in environment, to meet new people and to have fewer restrictions. Students believe moving away will help in

Barham High School –

The main reasons given for studying in the region included;

- Maintenance of family and friend support
- Improved financial support
- Sporting ties
- Don't like the city
- The expense and cost of accommodation

The reasons given for wishing to leave the region were similar to those given in other discussions, including;

- Course not provided in the region
- Wishing to study where there will be future employment options
- Experience a larger town with more excitement and employment opportunities
- Meet people from other places
- On campus experience
- Cultural change, change of lifestyle

3. Community Survey

The attached survey was developed and circulated to the community to supplement the initial responses to the MMLLEN survey. It followed a similar format, but was more widely promoted and the opportunity was provided to pick up the form and fill and mail it in.

The survey forms were made available at each of the Swan Hill Rural City, Gannawarra, Balranald, Buloke and Wakool Shire main offices.

They were also available at each of the colleges, the Kerang Learning Centre the Swan Hill campus of Sunraysia TAFE and at the Swan Hill office of the MMLLEN.

Survey Responses:

There were a total of 109 responses to the survey questions regarding future study. Of those 105 wished to study locally, with 4 preferring not to.

A broad array of course areas were proposed as outlined in the following table. While a number would not be regional priorities, with some being delivered by specialist institutions, the following were the priority course areas of interest:

- Bachelor Degree in Business Management
- Bachelor of Commerce/Accounting
- Masters/Degree in Social Work
- Graduate Diploma in Nursing (Emergency/Critical Care)
- Masters in Education
- Degree in Teaching (Primary/Pre-school)
- Degree in Law

Course of Study	Number of Responses
Bach/Degree in Business Mgt	16
Degrees in Social Sciences, Welfare, Health Promotion Social Welfare/ Disabilities	12
Degree in Teaching (Primary/Pre-School)	9
Degree in Law	8
Bach of Commerce/Accounting	7
Masters / Degree in Social Work	7
Grad Diploma in Nursing (Emergency / Critical Care)	6
Degree in Teaching (Secondary)	5
Masters in Business Administration	5
Human Resources	5
Masters in Psychology	3
Post Graduate Degree in Engineering	3
Degree in Hospitality Mgt	3
Degree in Business (Finance)	2
Degree in Theology (or related areas)	2
Bach in Property Valuing	2
Post Graduate Course in Tourism / marketing	2
Diploma of Conservation & Land Mgt	2
Degree in Arts - Community Development, Museum Studies	2
Degree in Environmental Studies. Planning or Catchment & Land Mgt	2
Degree in Hort/Ag Production & Mgt (or related courses)	2
Post Graduate Studies in Health-care, Radiology, Allied Health, Health Administration (not just nursing)	1
Short-courses in Accounting/Bookkeeping	1
Degree in Veterinarian Science	1
Degree in Literature	1
Degree in Health Economics	1
Masters in Education	1
Degree in IT	1
Degree in Human Behaviour	1
Bach / Degree in Electrical Engineering	1
Degree in Horticulture and Aquaculture (all relevant to the region).	1
Bach/Degree in Community Development	1
Degree in Toxicology	1
Degree in Science (VET)	1
Degree in Wine Making	1
Degree in Statutory Planning	1
Landscape Architecture	1
Pharmacy	1

Community Survey Form

Tertiary Education Research Study

The Murray Mallee Local Learning and Employment Network (LLEN) is developing a case for the delivery of tertiary studies into the Swan Hill/Kerang region.

To do this the Murray Mallee LLEN needs to establish the level of demand of those who wish to study locally at tertiary level.

This survey will help to establish the demand and the priority courses for the region.

If you wish to participate, return the completed form by any of the following

- Return to LLEN offices in Beveridge Dome, Beveridge St, Swan Hill
- Deliver to any of the Swan Hill Rural City, Gannawarra, Wakool, Buloke (Sea Lake or Wycheproof office) or Balranald Shire offices.
- Mail to 'Tertiary Survey', Murray Mallee LLEN, PO Box 527, Swan Hill 3585

1. If you have studied or completed an undergraduate or postgraduate university course within the past five years;

i) **What course is being/was studied and at which institution?**

.....

ii) **What is/was your mode of delivery?**

- Full-time
 Part-time
 Flexible delivery (e.g. online)

2. **If you have not, or wish to undertake further study;**

i) **Would you like to study in this region?**

YES NO

ii) **What course or area would you like to study?**

.....

iii) **What mode of delivery would you prefer?**

- Full-time
 Part-time
 Flexible delivery (e.g. online)

3. How old are you? (optional – for data purposes)

15 – 19 20 – 24 25 – 44 45 +

For more information please contact Project Manager, John Webb on 0437324289, or Murray Mallee LLEN Executive Officer, Glen Stewart on 5033 2017 or via email mmlengs@bigpond.net.au

Student Survey Form

Tertiary Education Research Study

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College/School **Year level**

1. Do you intend to continue into tertiary study after year 12?

| YES | NO UNDECIDED

2. What area of study would you like to do?

.....

3. Would you like to study within this region if the opportunity was available at tertiary level? (Please circle)

YES Full course

YES Initial year/s then relocate to complete course

NO

4. If so, why? (e.g. Family, Sporting, Financial)

.....

5. If not, why not? (e.g. Change of location, On-campus experience)

.....

6. If not, what university location would you prefer? (Capital city, Regional)

.....

Thank you very much for your time.

