

Parliament of Victoria
Rural and Regional Services
and Development Committee

Inquiry into Retaining Young People
in Rural Towns and Communities

A Submission written by the
Quality of Life and Social Justice Flagship
of the Australian Catholic University

April 2006

Submission for Inquiry into Retaining Young People in Rural Towns and Communities

The following address to the Rural and Regional Services and Development Committee of the Parliament of Victoria follows the Terms of Reference set out in the Premier's letter of 17 January, 2006. The identification and examination of factors that influence young people in deciding to leave, or remain in, or return to the rural communities in which they have previously resided is based on eleven interviews conducted by the Quality of Life and Social Justice Flagship at the Australian Catholic University. The interviews were conducted with academic and general staff members and students from the Victorian campuses of ACU in Melbourne and Ballarat. Both campuses of ACU traditionally derive a significant proportion of their students from rural areas of Victoria. The interviewees were selected because of their being likely to possess differing perspectives on young people from rural areas. They included professional youth workers with rural experience, students and young staff members from rural areas, staff who have taught at the regional (Ballarat) campus for a number of years and staff who have acquired experience of conditions in rural areas through family connections. It seems worth noting that none of the interviewees is Indigenous, which we think would constitute a significant omission in a larger survey.

The interviewees were presented with a copy of the Terms of Reference and encouraged to comment on them in whatever way they wished. It was decided that these interviews should not be compared with the many sources of current information available from websites or print publications but should be allowed to constitute a separate small body of evidence in its own right. Because of the relative smallness of ACU staff numbers in Victoria, it has not been possible to include the interviews in this Submission because of issues of confidentiality.

It was noted that even from such a small sample, and despite the criterion for selection, the interviewees' responses clearly conformed to a predominant pattern. There was some difference between the responses that originated in, or concerned, large regional centres and small or medium-sized towns. These differences will be indicated wherever they are felt to be significant.

I gladly approve the information submitted in the following pages.



Associate Professor Ruth Webber
Director, Quality of Life and Social Justice Flagship
Australian Catholic University

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Quality of Life and Social Justice Flagship
ACU National
115 Victoria Parade
Fitzroy VIC 3065
Telephone: 03 9953 3221
Email: r.webber@patrick.acu.edu.au

1. The identification and examination of the factors that influence young people in deciding to remain in or leave the rural communities in which they reside.

The consistently repeated response from the interviewees was that the three principal factors influencing young people in deciding to remain in or leave the rural communities in which they reside are:

- a) the availability or lack of employment
- b) the availability or lack of opportunities for further education
- c) the desire or lack of desire to experience a different culture

a) *The availability or lack of employment*

The lack of employment opportunities everywhere in rural Victoria is well known and much discussed within families. Agriculture in particular has been steadily declined as a career choice over a considerable number of years. Small farms are failing, and farms of all sizes have suffered because of drought. In addition, a significant proportion of land that used to be available for farming has been sold to private developers for use as wind farms (which do not generate wealth for rural communities because they are foreign-owned) or for wood chipping or for housing. People from the country are concerned that land that is dedicated to these uses is vulnerable to being badly managed in terms of feral animals. For all of these reasons, the land can no longer support the creation of wealth. The economic factors that have caused change in rural areas, including the failing economic viability of small farms, has led to fewer people working and living in rural communities, which has led, in turn to an erosion in the number of people who make their living by supporting them. This shrinkage and centralisation affects the next generation, becoming a self-perpetuating cycle. One respondent who grew up in a 'tiny' town near Mildura spoke with feeling about the shrinkage of communities all the way up the Sunraysia Highway. Half the shops are empty, and the empty buildings are left to become derelict. There are fewer people in these towns, fewer people on the street. Where there are fewer children in schools, and fewer staff employed to teach them, there are fewer choices for the young people who remain: they will have to leave. Another respondent remarked that when young people leave the country, there is not another generation who comes in to replace them in the way that there is in the city. A third interviewee notes that, in the rural area where she grew up, the local newspaper advertises jobs for 'anything that services farming', which suggests an erosion of services to farmers who have remained in the local area.

The respondents did make some distinctions between their perceptions of employment opportunities in larger regional centres as opposed to small towns, but this was not a consistent factor: different regional centres appear to have different employment prospects for young people according to their chosen career path. For example, Ballarat was commented upon by one interviewee as being a potential place of employment because it has a hospital with specialist beds, but another interviewee pointed out that even though the employment rate for ACU Nursing graduates from both campuses is 100%, there have been no vacancies for nursing graduates from anywhere in the Ballarat hospital for a number of years. The distinction between small towns and larger regional centres seemed more significant in relation to opportunities for further education.

A consistent feature of the interviews was that young people who wish to pursue higher education must leave their rural community. None of the interviewees had themselves remained in rural communities or larger regional centres, but all of them knew of family

members or friends who had done so. There was no pattern asserted by the interviewees as to who stayed in the country and who left, but all of the people mentioned as having stayed, as it happened, were young males. Those who stay in the rural communities in which they grew up might obtain one of the very few Government-funded posts, but they will have to contemplate the possibility of a considerable economic sacrifice in order to remain in the country. Pay-rates in the private sector are considerably lower in the country than they are in the city because rural-based positions are considered less desirable. Those who choose to remain in rural communities may make a significant financial sacrifice from which there is no way back. One respondent also noted that even if she were able to find a position in a rural community, there would be little prospect of changing from one type of post to another; employment prospects mean more than the existence of jobs.

Another respondent noted that young people of either gender who have pursued an interest in the arts will not be able to make a living in small rural communities where agriculturalists are struggling to survive; they may, however, do better in some of the larger regional centres such as Castlemaine, which has encouraged diversity and attracted an alternative subculture that includes young people.

Family finances were asserted as being a critical factor in the decision to leave or to stay in a rural or regional community. One interviewer observed that the traditional pattern of young men being routinely sent from farms to boarding schools in the city is fast disappearing due to financial constraints imposed by drought, although this is sometimes still possible where there is only one child, who is male, in the family. Another interviewer noted that where there is more than one child, of either gender, the financial situation for families is correspondingly challenging. It seems worth noting that the current conditions for eligibility for an Austudy award might have prevented one interviewee and her brother, who both received this award 'from time to time' as well as a book scholarship from the Country Women's Association, from pursuing higher education in the current economic climate. The interviewee has a successful career as an academic and her brother, who obtained an engineering degree, subsequently returned to the country to become a farmer, a career in which his engineering expertise has a practical application.

b) *The availability or lack of opportunities for further education*

There is huge concern about the elision of the few tertiary educational resources through closure, lack of funding and poor enrolment. One respondent thought that ENTER scores clearly reflect a metrocentric perspective: the educational opportunities for smaller populations are rationalised according to the opportunities for a large urban population. It was generally felt that the cycle of poor enrolments in rurally situated educational institutions is perpetuated by market-led values. Those who have high ENTER scores want a city education because that is what high scorers "ought to want". They are clearly informed by the school, general society and the media that the larger well-established city campuses have higher status and therefore are considered a better career choice. The interviews show that the status of urban educational institutions plays a huge part in decision-making and that this does not by any means always result in the best (most appropriate) educational choice for young people. One respondent reported an advertisement by a secondary school in a regional centre that claimed success because 'x number of' students were awarded places at the University of Melbourne. When the school received objections to this measure of success, it responded by altering its claim to include 'x number of places' at the University of Melbourne and 'x number of places' at Monash University. One interviewer mentioned the existence of a shame

culture attached to staying; he claims that the failure of not having left the regional centre is felt but not necessarily spoken.

Another respondent mentioned that the educational opportunities that do exist in larger regional centres do not service their local districts. It is noteworthy, for example, that there is no student from the Western District currently enrolled in the Aquinas (Ballarat) campus of ACU. It is impossible to say without further investigation of the enrolment base whether this indicates a dislocation of a deeper nature.

In some cases, whole families will choose to move to the city to support children pursuing education or training. This is especially the case with young people from Iraqi migrant communities. The parent immigrants who have been resettled in rural communities tend often to be very well educated and want their children to have comparable educational opportunities.

c) *The desire or lack of desire to experience a different culture*

More than half of those interviewed explicitly stated that they had sought to leave the country and had pursued educational opportunities in the city as a means to do this. Three of the interviewees who were women who had grown up in very small rural communities expressed the view that such environments can be narrow-minded, hostile, racist and homophobic. One interviewee summed up this view as a culture of drinking and violence for men and a culture of victimhood for women. Smaller rural communities were agreed to have a monoculture which is a 'pub culture', and this has been a significant factor in the exclusion of Islamic immigrants. Most interviewees also commented on the harmful effect of this culture on both males and females who participate in it. It contributes to the constrictive myth of tough Australian masculinity in the Bush, and it perpetuates the stereotype of women as passive victims.

Women were seen to have particular issues in relation to rural culture. The narrowness of the life of a farmer's wife, the hard work and the social isolation were continually repeated throughout the interviews. Women in particular tended to feel that life was mapped out for them if they stayed in the country, and they sought freedom from such constraints by leaving. Some respondents went further, saying that they saw their own future in the country as victimhood, with unprotected sex followed by unwanted pregnancy. It was the view of some interviewees that young women are more likely to leave the country than are young men, due to their being even fewer opportunities for them. The population of unsupported men in the country is then vulnerable to alcohol and drug abuse, injury or death through driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs (or inflicting same), violent behaviour (including violence against women and children), unprotected sex, and suicide. This view is supported by a good deal of anecdotal evidence from interviews. One interviewee from a very small community mentioned four young men and a young woman who committed suicide and two young men who are facing prison; all are from the same generation.

Several respondents mentioned that young Gay men and Lesbians, and those in the process of acknowledging dissident forms of sexuality, would also have to leave country towns in order to express their sexual identity. It seems worth nothing that this was asserted by even the most loyal devotee of the small rural town amongst the group of interviewees.

Other factors which might influence young people's decisions about whether to remain in the country or whether to leave are wholly more positive. One respondent states that 'It's natural for young people to want to leave home.' It is a part of their social growth; they do not wish to remain as sons and daughters in their parents' house. Seeking to

leave home, even if that also means leaving the local area, is not in itself a negative factor. As another respondent put it, 'Attendance at University is not just about getting a job'. Young people from rural areas might also want to have the opportunity to pursue recreational experiences other than sport – e.g. going to the movies, going shopping, going dancing, going out to eat, going to a museum or an art gallery, finding a well-stocked library. In addition, two student interviewees observed that their success in negotiating city life was dependent on their being able to tolerate if not welcome the opportunities to meet new people. For some people from close-knit communities, this experience could be profoundly alienating.

2. The identification and examination of the factors that influence young people in deciding whether or not to return to the rural communities in which they have previously resided following the completion of study, travel or other fixed or short term activities in other places.

The persistence of factors that oblige young people to leave rural communities are largely responsible for their deciding whether or not they are able to return to them. It seems worth noting that amongst the group of respondents interviewed, 'returning to the country' does not necessarily mean returning to one's original rural township or regional centre. Even the young people who are most determined to recover a place in a rural community have chosen possible alternatives to the community in which they grew up. They seem resigned to the fact that their community of origin may not be able to support them.

With one or two significant exceptions, there is a widespread nostalgia for the countryside and for the closeness of rural communities on the part of those who grew up in them. One respondent spoke of the pleasure of walking her dogs in the rural area in which she grew up. She describes the relief of having space and the sense of freedom that it brings, a freedom from being constrained by walls: 'There's a peacefulness and a silence, without any background hum.' Those who had grown up in small rural communities held strongly that the country is a better place than the city to raise children, being safer in terms of traffic and in terms of potential danger from people. One interviewee thought that, coming from a small country town, she had probably grown up to be more trusting than if she had grown up in the city. The aspect of city life that she most dislikes is the presence of conspicuous consumption. Only one interviewee, however, definitely intends to return to the country eventually to raise a family, intending first, however, to go overseas 'for a couple of years' and then work in the city 'for a couple of years'. This respondent envisages a life-partner who is also from a rural background and is also able to envisage settling in, or close to, the town where she grew up. Part of that envisioning involves her having a role in a school or a hospital; this would not relate directly to her current course of study, but might be adapted from it. This student spoke of a link that connects country people that is more than a set of shared values, although shared values are a part of it. While she enjoys the city, she also finds it 'unreal', and notes the strange silences of passengers on trams and the strangeness generally of people not knowing one another. Encountering another person from the country 'brings her back to earth', rescues her from the detachment that characterises the urban environment for her. Another respondent who grew up in the country and who is generally enjoying city life has only very recently reopened the possibility of returning to the country to raise a family; however, this would depend on the possibility of being able to pursue an alternative lifestyle involving the establishment of a creative/artistic business. Other interviewees from rural areas have not closed the door on the possibility of returning to the country but have no prospect for doing so.

3. Development of strategies and recommendations on steps that might be taken to increase the number of young people who decide to remain in or return to rural towns and communities.

a) It is essential that a true devolution of metropolitan power to regional centres takes place. This must be supported by properly funded initiatives as distinct from one-off projects.

- There have been some successful initiatives and interventions in the past – e.g. in Cobram: the Bollywood festival at the local cinema; the Iraqi women’s fashion show; the establishment of a community migrant reference committee to discuss issues of diversity; in Shepparton: initiatives for encouraging fitness for young women; the young women’s parenting group; the Ramadan soccer group (for men); in Horsham: the Horsham Arts Festival. These initiatives might serve as a model of what is possible – what can be sustained and built on. Initiatives which are imposed on communities and do not involve local people in the earliest planning stages have a history of failure, e.g. the adult education course at Cobram designed for Iraqi boys that was intended to fit in between cycles of season work; ‘discos’ designed for rural youth that only include one sector’s taste in dance music.

b) The closures and the erosion in the provision of tertiary education in regional centres has not only to be halted but forcibly reversed.

- It might be possible to standardise ENTER scores in such a way that rural students who might wish to stay in or near their local areas can still receive further education, even though their scores may be slightly lower than their city counterparts. This might be undertaken selectively – e.g. for nurses and teachers: professions which traditionally attract women, who might then be able to find local employment.
- There need to be better and more flexible educational packages for students from rural areas. The University of Ballarat at one stage ran some classes for rural students, who were able to start their first year at their local TAFE and were therefore able to remain in the country. This kind of initiative might be used as a model for further initiatives.
- It ought not to be assumed that students who come from rural communities wish only to follow courses of study or further training that have traditionally been associated with the country and for which there were once vacancies in rural communities; they should not have to travel to the city to pursue careers in medicine, psychology or youth work, for example, where their expertise is sorely needed in their local areas. Tertiary institutions in regional centres could provide a broader range of training that could be geared to work in rural areas.
- Tertiary institutions in regional centres could provide support (e.g. supervision) for professional development in cases where expertise from the city is required, as it is in the areas named above. In general, however, the Government should try to effect a change of emphasis so as to prioritise funding to develop ongoing rural-based initiatives rather than fleeting visits from urban experts. It should be added that properly supported professionals from the city would not have to endure an unwonted social isolation and would be in a better position to make a more sustained contribution than is currently possible.

- Institutions in Melbourne which attract rural students could introduce a stream of courses in various disciplines (e.g. youth work) that focus on rural requirements and conditions. This would allow the city to make some form of reparation to the country.
- c) ***Additional provisions required to support secondary school students***
- Students in secondary education in rural areas are entitled to expert career counselling; furthermore, their emotional stability may be heavily dependent on it.
 - More trained school counsellors need to be provided for students in rural areas, and these professionals need to be supported by full protocols (supervision, debriefing, &c.).
 - Students urgently need better sex education and better social education re: violence, substance abuse, criminal behaviour, etc.
- d) ***Government needs to exert considerable pressure on shire councils to move toward the wholesale reorganisation of rural locales on a model of inclusivity and diversity***
- Shire councils could be required to include young people in planning and decision-making.
 - The Government might audit rural shires and councils to see to what extent young people are involved in decision-making in the community.
 - The model for initiatives of this kind is Castlemaine, which is in the process of becoming an Arts city. One reason that it is working is that is close enough to the city to support different communities who are bringing in business and different ways of thinking.
 - The success or failure of a small community in Victoria is greatly dependent on its access to public transport. Rochester is felt to be a successful small town because the train journey is only marginally longer than a car journey. Koo-wee-rup, which used to have a train that allowed young people to come into the city and leave again, has been crippled by its discontinuance; a very small community needs to make some provision for the recreational needs of young people. The train service to Ballarat, a major regional centre, is widely regarded as inadequate and inappropriate to the needs of a diverse community ('one size fits all').
- e) ***Government needs urgently to implement better health initiatives***
- Access to specialist beds needs urgent attention. Ballarat, for example, has one oncologist who visits once a fortnight.
 - The difficulty of obtaining confidential treatment in small communities needs to be recognised and a strategy for maintaining a modicum of anonymity implemented. This is especially true in matters of sexual health. Many young people, especially women, leave their local communities to seek the anonymity of being a patient in the city.
 - Strategies need to be developed to support young people with emotional and mental health needs in rural areas. This is a large area, but one respondent has noted that in the light of her experience, bereavement counselling would be a start.

- More and better interventions in the area of sex education in the context of a wider social education need to be implemented through local secondary schools in rural areas. Such needs are not met by social welfare officers.