

# CORRECTED VERSION

## RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

### Subcommittee

#### Inquiry into retaining young people in rural towns and communities

Alexandra — 12 April 2006

#### Members

Mr B. P. Hardman  
Mr C. Ingram

Mr J. M. McQuilten

Chair: Mr B. P. Hardman

#### Staff

Executive Officer: Ms L. Topic  
Research Officer: Dr P. Chen

#### Witnesses

Mr C. D. Rowe, principal (affirmed);

Ms V. A. Danby, vocational education and training-Victorian certificate of applied learning coordinator (affirmed); and

Ms L. Hogan, managed individual pathways and careers coordinator (affirmed), Alexandra Secondary College.

**The CHAIR** — Under the powers conferred on this committee by the Constitution Act and the Parliamentary Committees Act, this committee is empowered to take all evidence at these hearings on oath or affirmation and I wish to advise all present at these hearings that all evidence taken by this committee, including submissions, is, under the provisions of the Constitution Act and the Parliamentary Committees Act, granted immunity from judicial review. I also wish to advise witnesses that any comments made by them outside the committee hearing are not protected by parliamentary privilege. We are an all-party parliamentary committee including an Independent, and we are conducting an inquiry into retaining young people in rural towns and communities.

Would please provide your full name and address and the name of the organisation you are representing today?

**Mr ROWE** — My address is [ADDRESS REMOVED]Alexandra, and I am the principal of Alexandra Secondary College.

**Ms DANBY** — My address is [ADDRESS REMOVED]Acheron.

**Ms HOGAN** — My address is [ADDRESS REMOVED] Taggerty. I am a careers councillor and I am the managed individual pathways (MIPS) coordinator, a careers coordinator and year 9 and 10 coordinator — and lots of things.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you for giving us your time today to come and talk to us. If you could please provide us with a brief statement or some remarks, then we will have some questions for you following that.

**Mr ROWE** — I have been at this school six months and I think one of the stand-out characteristics of the college is that it works very hard at providing pathways. I know all state schools do, but I think Alexandra college is very strong in the area of providing pathways for the transition from school to work. Whether that work is going to be local or elsewhere is irrelevant; it is a pathway that we are building up, so there are many ways, I guess, the school could be adding to the drift of kids away from the district because our task is to provide pathways for them.

I think, too, you might be familiar with mission statements that schools put out about their guiding principles. Of course, one of the guiding principles of a lot of state schools, or a lot of schools really, is to prepare kids for a global society, and in many respects we work pretty hard to give them maybe a national or international perspective. So, yes, in many respects your world is your oyster. Listening to the young girl who spoke before, that goes hand in hand with forward-looking kids who in many respects want to move on and get out and about. That is the sort of general mix that is going on in schools. Looking at our data, 30 per cent of our students go to university. About 30 per cent go to TAFE, I would say. The other 30 are local. Just to add to the data, and correct me if I am wrong, every student who enters the college goes either to further training, university or employment, virtually.

**Ms DANBY** — I am the VET-VCAL coordinator at the school. We have students doing a range of VET subjects and that is terrific, and that can lead to employment locally. I am here basically because I would like to see ways that could broaden the educational offerings within our area so that students who do not want to go do have that opportunity.

I would particularly like to see something done perhaps for people who want to do university, where they could study locally. I know that Deakin has some excellent off-campus courses, but people are basically on their own and we could provide a facility either at CEACA or at the school or somewhere where students who were doing their off-campus degree could do it together and have those on-line facilities.

I have had the experience of two of my children doing off-campus degrees through Deakin and one of them was in Melbourne because of her need to stay home and look after children. The other is in Mansfield and they do get the camaraderie and the relationship with other students. They are in constant email contact with tutors and fellow students. There are regular times when they go to Melbourne and they meet and have either social occasions or work occasions, and they do get the feeling of being on campus even though they are off campus.

At Deakin, even students who are there full time on campus still do a lot of their work through their on-line resources. I just figure that if we could make that more obvious to students, they can do their degree and stay here and they do not have to sit at home in their bedroom with their computer for the next three or four years. There is actually a facility that we call the off-campus facility and we provide a trained teacher or tutor or someone to guide them and be there and support them. I think that would be terrific.

**Mr McQUILTEN** — That is a good idea.

**Ms DANBY** — I am not against students going to Melbourne to be educated but I just think we do have that obligation to try and meet some of their needs here so they do not have to do that.

**The CHAIR** — Thanks, Vicki.

**Ms HOGAN** — I am the middle school coordinator, managing individual pathways coordinator at Alexandra Secondary College and the careers coordinator and I have been that for a number of years now; I love it; it is great; it is the best job in the school, even better than the principal's job.

**Mr ROWE** — There is high morale at my school!

**Ms HOGAN** — I am also a year 10 works skills teacher. We have got a fairly new program that we have been operating, and it is in its third year now. It has really been aimed at trying to open the eyes of students to the opportunities that are around for them, both locally but also in a broader sense. It is also getting them to take a bit of personal responsibility for mapping their own pathways and getting to step away from the peer group and all that sort of stuff, because that is the age where it is very difficult to do that.

You have probably heard people earlier today or if you have not heard from them now you will in the afternoon, from the ARC committee, Alexandra Rural Connections. Have you had these people come in?

**The CHAIR** — Yes, all the Berry Street people came in first off this morning.

**Ms HOGAN** — I have been a member of that group since its inception in 2003 and basically its aim was to connect young people in the community with other significant adults and it has been really successful, I have found. I do a lot of course selection stuff with kids and I have done that over a number of years. Since we have had this program in place my work load has probably become one-tenth of what it used to be because every kid would come in not knowing things, and now they are much more knowledgeable about the options available to them. I think that has been a great outcome for the kids but it has been a great outcome for me too. I spoke to some of my students just over the last week or so — and particularly this morning with my year 10 kids — just to tell them what I was doing today, and they were very eager for me to tell you some things, so I will do that too as I go.

About the factors that influence young people in leaving the rural towns, the vast majority of our students who leave school in year 10 or at the end of year 10 or during year 11 or at the end of year 11 or during year 12 will get employment or apprenticeships or traineeships here. We have a really supportive community and anything we ask them to do in terms of connecting young people with opportunities and stuff, they bend over backwards to do it. Most of our kids are absorbed in the local industries in some way — out at the turf farm, for example, with some in the aquaculture. Also we have got the big tea farm, green tea stuff we have got happening, and a lot of hospitality south in Marysville and that sort of stuff, so a lot of the kids will get jobs in those areas.

Most of the students who complete year 12 will leave to go to the city for mostly educational purposes. A lot of them will come back on weekends, because it is only an hour and a half, 2 hours, back up here, to play for the footy team or the netball team or something like that. So they maintain a connection here in that sense and many of them will — well, not many of them, but a significant number of them — actually return. Not so much if they have done university courses, but if they have done TAFE courses or traineeships or apprenticeships in Melbourne, a lot of them will come back here in their late 20s and 30s with families or to start families and that. They feel it is a good place to actually come back to.

The OEG activities group out on the front Eildon road offers tertiary courses in outdoor education and recreation, and some of our students take up that option. But most of the students who take up those courses are from outside of our community. They come in because they have got snow-skiing or water sports or whatever it is, and they move in here to do some of their courses.

Holmesglen TAFE has bought some land out at Eildon — I do not know how many acres; quite a significant amount of acres — and they are aiming to set up a campus that will cater for a bit of outdoor education but also horticulture, so that will be something that will be good for a lot of our young people. Swinburne campus — there is a campus at Healesville and Lilydale — students from south of here, Alexandra kids, do not seem to access that; but kids that live in Narbethong, Buxton or Marysville will often access that and just come back home, because it is

only 20 minutes, half an hour, for them to drive, which is what they would be doing in Melbourne anyway if they were accessing courses. So we do have students who use those, but the vast majority of them go away to Melbourne to do their study.

They want to do that because they want the bright lights. I do not think that is a bad thing. I think if that is what they are interested in doing, when they do come back, they come back a lot more worldly and a lot more aware of multiculturalism — that is because we are very monoculture up here. I think that is an important asset to have in our community — just to be a bit more broadminded and a bit more understanding that Australia is a whole.

My year 10 work skills kids this morning were most eager for me to tell you that they thought there were not enough different things in the community for young people. They said sport is well catered for, but anything that is a bit cultural is not. One of the things they found difficult was that for kids who live in Buxton or Marysville, for them to access something in Alexandra is a bit of a logistical nightmare, and the same thing for kids from Eildon or Merton — just the tyranny of distance makes it very difficult. If you are going to run something in Marysville, the Alex kids will not go; if you're going to run something in Alex here, the kids might come, but they might not. It is all that sort of issue.

I think I have said that there are not probably a lot of professional opportunities for any of our university graduates in law or commerce or engineering, that type of stuff. We just do not have the industries here to support and to provide a lot of jobs for those people, although there are people who end up with apprenticeships and traineeships and going on — there is some sort of scope for them.

The perception that a lot of students who leave here have is that big money cannot be made in the country; that you have to go to Melbourne to actually make lots of money, which seems to be a bit of a motivating force for young people. They think that is going to make them happy. Yet one of the things they do say when they come back is, 'Oh, it costs so much to rent a place in Melbourne. You are always spending money on petrol' and that sort of stuff. There are those hidden costs that they do not appreciate, and for a lot of them that becomes a bit of a motivating force to come back here because it actually is way too expensive.

I guess the strategy is to increase the numbers of young people. Just from a school point of view, with our year 10 work skills program, we are trying to heighten awareness of the opportunities that are in our local businesses — for example, we took our students down to Gould's sawmills just last week. It is a big timber town and we have got 80 kids in year 10, and I asked how many kids have actually ever been into Gould's. Now, they have lived here all their lives, most of those kids, and we had 5 kids who have actually been in there out of 80. I asked them how many of their parents had been in there, and they said that only the parents who worked there had been in there, but none of the others had actually been in the sawmill to actually see the way that it operated. I have to confess I had never been in there either, and it was fascinating. But I think that is perhaps a really important thing, that local businesses probably need to showcase what they have got a bit more to young people to keep them here, at least to make them aware that they can come back and get good employment and ongoing employment and satisfying jobs and well-paid jobs.

We have got a mentoring program going on, too, where we have kids in the community matched with significant adults in the community. They teach them how to network and get them in contact with people who may be able to assist them in their pathways. We run work experience and structured workplace learning, and the local community is fantastic about doing that. Very often our kids who go out on work experience or work placement end up getting an apprenticeship or a traineeship with the local people, so that is a bit of an indication of support that is around.

I think one of the other things is that the school-based new apprenticeships, which have been around for a number of years now — it is just very difficult to market that to local people. They do not quite understand it. I do not know how we get around that. We have had regional consultants go in and talk to them and we have had information nights, but particularly for small businesses, they find it difficult to get their heads around how a kid can go to school and do an apprenticeship at the same time. They keep saying, 'We do not want to interfere with their learning, their education at the school'. It is just that concept of what education is; it is not about just sitting in a classroom. But I think that is just a bit of a traditional way of looking at education.

I think that probably the vast majority of our students have part-time work, and some of those students will go on and work for that organisation once they have finished school, but the vast majority of them just see it as something

to do while they are at school and do not see it as a career pathway. Yet local businesses are quite keen to take on people that they have already trained up in that capacity — to take on in another mode. I guess that is my bit!

**Mr INGRAM** — There has been a suggestion put that some careers counsellors at schools tend — whether or not directly — to give the impression that going to TAFE is failing or that remaining in the local area is failing. Do you believe that is something that is passed on to students, or is it something that is probably just a perception? I can put it another way — that is, that the only real success is if you get good grades and go to university. That seems to be a direction that school students seem to be getting.

**Ms HOGAN** — We can talk about retention figures and about how by 2010 we are aiming to have 90 per cent of kids complete year 12 or its equivalent, and that our school probably does not meet that figure, but I think it is just insulting to the vast majority of our kids. Why would schools let kids out the door in years 10, 11 and 12 without sitting down and coming up with an exit plan? I do think there is a public perception that doing a traineeship — in engineering, hospitality or horticulture or whatever — is not as good as getting a law degree. People tend to think that, but I think it is changing. You measure success and achievement in a whole range of ways.

In our work skills classes we expose all our kids to many pathways, including those with the aspiration to be an astronaut. We talk to them about what apprenticeships are, and that there are other ways to become an astronaut. We tell them that they do not have to go to university, and that there are other pathways to get to the same point. We celebrate kids who leave school and walk into apprenticeships. We do not say, 'That kid has left school because they could not cope with school'. We say, 'Congratulations Doug O'Brien. You have scored a wonderful apprenticeship in engineering down at Gould's'. We went to Gould's the other day to visit Doug, and he was just busting to show the kids what he was doing. He only left at the end of last year, and the kids were so excited to see him down there. There is that perception in some way, but I think it is changing, and we are trying to change it in schools.

**Mr ROWE** — Certainly I can remember 10 years ago when a couple of kids at the school I was at left at the end of year 10. A comment was, 'Isn't it a shame they failed?', but that is nonsense. It only meant that they had not finished year 12. It has changed, so that if a student has a pathway and a job to go to, then leaving at year 11 is fine. Probably the VCE hung around for too long as a general certificate. VCAL certainly made a big difference. VCAL has opened up the perception that trades and jobs that do not involve university courses are acceptable. Probably the downside of that is that the VCAL certificate has helped retain students without resourcing their courses. My dig at the education department is that it is not resourcing us with the physical resources, technical workshops and facilities that are needed to support VCAL. We certainly are retaining students in courses such as hospitality and auto, but we do not have the facilities for them, which makes things quite difficult.

**Mr INGRAM** — Can you expand on that, because that is an issue?

**Ms DANBY** — I am the VCAL-VET coordinator. VCAL itself gets very little funding — something like \$300 — and I have 20 students doing VCAL. You cannot run any course with that sort of money. The VET courses get funded, which is great because then it all comes down to financing what you can do, so I am putting VCAL kids into horticulture so that we get the VET money so that we can then do something in that class time. Providing \$300 or \$400 to put together a course for 20 students is just laughable. It does not even pay for the photocopying. I think our students value certificates, including TAFE certificates. They do not look down their noses at them. We have students who will go on and do law and all sorts of other higher qualifications, and others who are doing their certificates I and II in hospitality, certificates in auto, horticulture and in sport and recreation. They are quite valuable and are now thought of highly among students.

**Mr INGRAM** — One of the things that is put to me quite often is that schools, particularly smaller schools, do not have the capacity to purchase equipment to teach the students. If there is no local TAFE running a course, it is almost impossible to get it. Students have interests in particular areas, and there are job opportunities within those areas, but they cannot get the equipment.

**Mr ROWE** — That is right. And when the TAFE college is 40 minutes or an hour away, and we cannot get TAFE to come to us, it makes it very difficult. The government has an admirable goal towards retention — meaning Brackley's goals — but it is not backing it up with resources. We will retain students, but what do you do with them? The senior certificate can be split up so that each one is geared towards further employment, but what

about resourcing those lines? The government is not doing that, so we have to be very creative in finding ways of getting money.

**The CHAIR** — I think it might have been John who mentioned videoconferencing earlier. Yesterday a student from Euroa made a presentation to us while we were in Benalla. One of the other problems with resourcing is having a teacher to present or take on a course. Has there been any further thought around utilising the expertise of different schools to provide courses a bit further away? Are you utilising videoconferencing and those sorts of ideas?

**Mr ROWE** — The conversation on that very topic is just starting with my colleague in Yea and another colleague in Euroa, about how we can expand our senior curriculum. One side of it is getting human resources on line, and that is a very real possibility. I guess I was referring to the heavy machinery that you put into classrooms to teach the kids hospitality or VET or agriculture. You cannot deliver them all — you are not expected to — but if we are expected to engage these students down some lines, then they have to be resourced. But yes, we are making inquiries into videoconferencing and linking up the three schools in Euroa, Yea and Alexandra.

**The CHAIR** — And what about the idea of, for example, taking on an expertise in a particular area, such as hospitality or automotive engineering, and then perhaps sharing those resources between classes at schools and secondary colleges? Obviously I am aware that discussions are occurring, but has that moved forward, or can you see funding possibilities for it?

**Mr ROWE** — It is early days. John O'Meara from Yea and I have just had a casual conversation about perhaps using Alexandra as a VET source rather than travelling further to TAFE at Seymour. That is an interesting conversation which could develop. The germs are there, the kernels of conversation, and the discussion can move forward, too — for example, if a school specialises and is geared up, then it seems to be a nonsense to lock the doors at 4.30 and have everyone go home. You could open up those facilities to the community, which would help with retention of youngsters in the village, or retraining adults in the community. You would have a spin-off there as well.

**Ms HOGAN** — The other thing is that this organisation, the Continuing Education and Arts Centre of Alexandra, is very receptive to being a registered training organisation for some of the certificate courses — for example, this year our year 10 work skills kids are all enrolled in the certificate I in vocational preparation so that at the end of the year every year 10 kid will come out with one of those certificates, and CEACA is doing it for \$35 per kid. We taught work skills last year and the year before, and the kids were like, 'Oh, this stuff', but now it is in the certificate 1 in vocational preparation. Just being able to utilise this facility locally to do that is a good thing, too. There are those sorts of things.

**Ms DANBY** — Ben was talking about the videoconferencing. I cannot see how that could actually work in the VET area because we are talking about hands-on courses. Our difficulty there is in finding the funding to buy the materials. Students doing hospitality are cooking. We cannot afford a full commercial kitchen. We need all sorts of ducting, airconditioning and those sorts of things. Plus we need a lot of food. Videoconferencing is not going to help that; it is the auto hands-on again.

We can do the actual theory components online through the various TAFEs. However, the ones who are supplying all this and have all the unit work for us to use want so much money that we cannot afford to do it. We have to do it ourselves because it is out of the reach of our students or our VET money to pay for it. One of the other things that we could do, if you are talking about sharing resources, is that being a country school with particular areas of interest here, like the outdoor ed and things that we do well in the country, perhaps we could be attracting students from the city to come up here and do their education here with what we are very good at.

At the moment we are doing a very good outdoor education thing through our VET program. You can canoe around Alex and you can mountain climb and do all those things that you cannot do in the city. That would be another way of getting young people back into our country town.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you very much for presenting to us today.

**Witnesses withdrew.**