

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

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Witness

Assoc. Prof. D. O'Brien, head of campus, Institute of Food and Land Resources, Dookie Campus, Dookie College, University of Melbourne (affirmed).

The CHAIR — I have a statement to read before we begin. 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. 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 wish to advise that any comments made by witnesses outside the committee's hearing are not protected by parliamentary privilege.

We all are an all-party parliamentary committee, including an Independent, and we are hearing evidence today on the inquiry into retaining young people in rural towns and communities. Thank you for giving some time to come along today. Please state your full name and address and the name of the organisation you representing today.

Assoc. Prof. O'BRIEN — I am Dennis O'Brien, the head of the campus at Dookie College, which is a campus of the University of Melbourne. It is currently primarily with the faculty of land and food resources. I have been there for three years. I teach economics and statistics — that usually kills the conversation.

The CHAIR — If you could please make a brief statement.

Assoc. Prof. O'BRIEN — I was not aware of the process. Perhaps I will make a few statements about my views with respect to the role of education in rural and regional Victoria or rural and regional Australia generally.

First and foremost, it is not for everybody but it is essential for somebody and there are certain groups that absolutely require access to tertiary education, whether it be TAFE or university, due to a whole range of reasons. Take Shepparton, for example; there are cultural reasons why people cannot move away, especially women from the Afghan community and so forth. There are other reasons that people of mature age — which is really just above 20 — often cannot move because of work commitments, family commitments. So there are some that cannot move away. I think there are others that do not want to move away because they want to stay locally because they have got football and jobs and family and so forth.

Then I think there are others who that actually should move away. I think the view that we should keep all our young people in regional Australia is not as clear-cut as a lot of people would say. I think there is a lot of value in young people leaving but having incentives to come back, and we talk about people coming back 20, 30 or 40 years later. The experience I have got is a lot of people come back sometimes straight after university if the job and opportunities are there. Some will come back when they are quite ready to settle down, which is when they have got children and they value the lifestyle of rural and regional areas. But I think they come back with sort of a richness of the experience they have gained from being away. I think in some ways it would be unfortunate if you did not have people coming and going. I think rural areas are better off for people leaving and coming back and new people coming into them.

If I talk specifically about Dookie and agriculture and the students that come to the University of Melbourne to do agriculture, the first thing is that agriculture is not a very popular thing to do. It is the bane of my life that we often find young people wanting to do things like tourism and hospitality, which has a great snazziness about it, but the jobs in those areas are not as snazzy as they might seem and it is a fairly low, fairly flat structure as far as progressions are concerned, whereas the image of agriculture is very poor. The image that is portrayed in schools is a very poor. Agriculture is the subject you do if you are not academic, whereas agriculture is really applied science and offers outstanding jobs both in the cities and in rural areas. That is everything from farming to managing corporate farms to being advisers in the rural sector — because the departments of agriculture and so forth do not do that as much as private sector people now — through to food processing and marketing; the whole range of jobs is amazing. My great grizzle is that people do not realise the opportunities and therefore move on to what they think are city-based jobs.

I think a place like Dookie serves a great need because there are students who come to the University of Melbourne; some would not come to Dookie if we paid them to, because they just want to go to the city, and good on them. There are some that would never go to Melbourne. They would walk over hot coals to come to a place like Dookie because it is a place that to them is set in a rural setting, it is comfortable, it is applied, it has got a lifestyle and so forth that suits their background. I think the same thing applies to a whole range of rural campuses — Latrobe and Shepparton and so forth. It is not for everyone but it has got a very important role. That is pretty well it for me.

Mr INGRAM — Can you make a general comment on the regional universities and some of the challenges. It seems a number of them have not necessarily received the support that they probably should have from their metropolitan masters, if you like. Can you comment on that?

Assoc. Prof. O'BRIEN — Yes, I have actually had a lot of experience with that, because I have moved down from New South Wales; I was part of Southern Cross University. I think Melbourne University — you would have read about us in the press — has gone through a fairly difficult time over the last year or so. The problem there was that we had eight campuses, all of which were very small and had very expensive infrastructure. All of them except Dookie, of the regional ones, were basically TAFEs.

So there were two things happening: one was the cost of doing it, and the other was the philosophy of the university to be a TAFE provider. They decided not to be TAFE providers, and that is why Dookie has continued on. Longerenong, McMillan, Glenormiston and Gilbert Chandler have all gone on to be TAFEs. Burnley and Creswick, which are higher educational tertiary institutions, are still part of the University of Melbourne.

I think it is different. I have been at two universities that have had regional campuses — one was Southern Cross, which was regional already and had another regional campus, and that had a lot of problems. There was a lot of tension for resources and so forth. Melbourne University on the other hand is very much an urban university. It is proud to be an urban university, but it is also about to put a lot of money into Dookie. It also sees itself as having some sort of commitment to equity and access through regional campuses.

There is always a tension about whether we are getting a fair share of the pie and whether we are understood and the differences in cultures. I have spoken to people at La Trobe and I have talked to colleagues in rural health in Shepparton — they say the same sort of thing. It sometimes comes down to simple things like setting meetings. If we have a meeting at Dookie, it will be at 11 o'clock so that people can travel. If we have a meeting in Parkville, it will be at 9 o'clock because nobody has thought about travel. It is just a cultural thing sometimes.

I think the other thing in terms of support is that universities are expensive places to run. It is all very well to put federal-funded places and state-supported places in rural areas, but if nobody takes them up, if there is not a demand for it, then it is a hiding to nowhere. Eventually universities end up saying, 'We can't do this'. They get a lot of negative reaction from that, but they do have an issue. For example, if you are going to offer a Bachelor of Agriculture, in three years you are going to have to offer a minimum of four subjects for each year, so there are 12 subjects a semester. So you are talking about 24 to 40 subjects a year across a diverse range of topics — and that is just for one degree.

A lot of people think we should have medicine, architecture, law and agriculture. You are talking hundreds of subjects. You are talking a diverse range of staff. You cannot get someone like me to teach economic statistics, biology and chemistry. It just does not work that way. There are some financial imperatives on it as well. It is a difficult one.

The other thing is the quality of the education in the rural areas. First of all, the students tend to have lower ENTER scores. I think that is legitimate; it is an equity thing. Often the ENTER scores are a consequence of lower demand. An ENTER score is almost a price on some of the harder subjects. I remember when I was at Wollongong that engineering, which is about one of the most difficult courses you can do, had a really low ENTER score because nobody wanted to do it.

They had to get their numbers in, so they lowered their ENTER score because as you lower your ENTER score, you get more and more students. Agriculture at Dookie has an ENTER score of about 60, which is fairly typical of most regional universities. But the general ENTER scores for programs at Melbourne are in the 80s, 90s, 99 and that sort of thing.

The CHAIR — And you would be able to do similar kinds of courses as well?

Assoc. Prof. O'BRIEN — Yes, and the students in our Bachelor of Agriculture go between the two. I think the other thing with the equity issue in rural locations is there is some real value in it. There are some pluses and minuses. The fact that they are smaller means that students do not get quite the same university experience that they would get at a big campus. But the fact they are smaller also means students often have a greater chance of success because there is more contact, there is more involvement and class sizes are better. We teach more; whereas in Parkville or a bigger university you might lecture to 800 students, in Dookie we will teach to

30 students. It is a different sort of culture. There is a bit more focus on teaching whereas the bigger universities have a research focus.

The CHAIR — I suppose there are important steps that need to be taken to ensure that there are regional universities such as Dookie and that young people actually understand that they are there and they actually have the resources.

Assoc. Prof. O'BRIEN — Yes.

The CHAIR — What are the things that need to be done to make places like Dookie sustainable?

Assoc. Prof. O'BRIEN — For Dookie itself, we are working on a model of being sustainable because we are going to establish ourselves as a precinct. The university is about to invest a lot of money in that. Our structure at the moment is that there is us, and Goulburn Ovens TAFE have located their agricultural programs there, which I think is really important because that is an equity pathway thing, too.

One thing is that we are using similar resources, so it is efficient; the other thing is that we are creating pathways so students will come and do TAFE and then articulate on. I think that is a big issue for regional areas. I think TAFE plays a big role in that for people getting into education and then going on to it.

I have been in the game for a long time — I never left school, basically — but it is easy to forget that post-secondary education is not a thing a lot of people do. I think it is probably still only about 10 per cent of the population who go on to university. In rural areas, if you take a place like Shepparton, it is even lower. If you can improve access, then that would be a terrific thing.

I think the other thing with education now is that I have talked about a 'university experience'. I do not think university students go to university for a university experience the same way that I did 30 to 40 years ago. They go to get a degree, whereas I went because I was kind of expected to, and it was fun. Nowadays they are a lot more focused on the outcome.

The CHAIR — What about promoting agriculture as a worthy industry to go into?

Assoc. Prof. O'BRIEN — We have talked about it so much, and we say that we want more students to do agriculture or land and food resources, as we call it. The first thing we thought was that we need to change the image of agriculture. As soon as you say that, you think, 'Oh, my God. How are you going to do that?'. It is partly agriculture's fault. It portrays itself often as being in difficulty. There is always bad news — it is always wet, drought, price or free trade.

Mr McQUILTEN — It is true. I have got a vineyard.

Assoc. Prof. O'BRIEN — It is true, but there is also a lot of good news. If you look at the advertisements on TV and the 'Bugger!' ad — it is a great ad, but look at the image of agriculture in it. There are so many ads that show agriculture, and there is never anything flash about it. It is always a fairly ordinary image.

The CHAIR — Do you think therefore there needs to be a proactive role by government to actually promote agriculture as a career?

Assoc. Prof. O'BRIEN — I think there have been some very good ads at the moment of people locating in rural Victoria. I think a similar sort of approach to that on perhaps the industries that are located in rural and regional areas promote the idea that you can have a rich career. The other thing with Victoria, too, coming from New South Wales, is that I am amazed that Victorians often do not realise how close everything is. We live in Dookie and people think we live a long way away. We are 2¼ hours from the middle of Melbourne. If you lived 2¼ hours from the middle of Sydney, you would be thinking that you lived in Sydney almost.

We have a fantastic community in this little place called Dookie. I was in Melbourne yesterday, which is why I could not go to the meeting in Benalla. We will go down next week to pick up our daughter from the airport and have dinner, we will go down again on the following weekend to meet with our other daughter. We are back and forth all the time. We went to see the ballet last week.

Mr McQUILTEN — I was just about to say I can remember it took 2 hours to go to the opera and come home again.

Assoc. Prof. O'BRIEN — Yes. We went down to see the marathon and all that stuff — easy. So it is that idea of proximity. Then there is the thing we have in this area with north-east Victoria, which people often think is not near anything. We have Milawa, Brown Brothers and Rutherglen. It is fantastic.

Mr INGRAM — Dennis, you would understand that as part of the committee process we are writing a report, making recommendations to government along the terms of reference — how do we aim our people or get them back once they have achieved their skills and to add that into those rural communities. You have the opportunity to provide a recommendation to government. What are those high priority things that need to be done?

Assoc. Prof. O'BRIEN — It would probably sound a bit shallow, but I think the most important thing would be having people aware of what is available and what the options are in rural and regional communities such as in the patch I am in, which is agriculture; or in land and food resources, which is everything from resource management, water management right through to food production, transport — all those things. There are fantastic opportunities that people do not seem to be able to have. The other thing is an awareness of community, which often is not important to young people, and also the access to entertainment and the lifestyle.

I think then you would go the next step which would be investment and incentive to have industry develop in rural areas, but to a large extent that is happening reasonably spontaneously anyway in Victoria. There does not seem to be a great issue, again, partly as a consequence of having good roads, easy access to Melbourne, some good regional cities.

I could say we need more funding at Dookie, that would be nice; but we do not, we need more students. It is that simple. We want people who want to do it, and that is a consequence partly of a downturn in the need for agriculture to have people but also an image thing.

Mr INGRAM — So are there clearly jobs at the end when someone qualifies. They can walk into jobs?

Assoc. Prof. O'BRIEN — Yes. Ours walk into jobs before they leave.

Mr INGRAM — That is an important point because there appears to be a large number of careers we are really struggling to fill, to get people to take them up. If someone gets the ENTER score to do medicine, they do medicine; they do not become a dentist where we have no dentists. Is there any way that we can really highlight this to young people — say, 'Okay, these are jobs where you are probably going to earn more money simply because there is a lack of qualified people out there, so there is a greater opportunity once you reach your — — ': are we doing enough?

Assoc. Prof. O'BRIEN — No, there is a real thing with students and their parents that you do not waste your ENTER score. So if you get a 95 ENTER score you do dentistry whether you want to be a dentist or not. If you get a 99.5 you do medicine. You would not waste it on doing agriculture, because you only need to get 65 to get into agriculture. That is an absolute tragedy, because a lot of people who get very high ENTER scores will not necessarily make great doctors and they would be a lot happier doing something else. Again, some of it comes down to good advice from schools on career options, good school career advisers, the attitudes of career advisers. I think the attitudes of schools to rural universities is usually fairly poor. They tend to have gone to metropolitan universities themselves and will tell students they should go to a metropolitan university, but I think students should be given the option. If you want to go to a metropolitan university, if that is what you want to do, go to a metropolitan university. If you want to go to a regional university for this-and-this reason, by all means go to that. Do not just presume that going to Melbourne is better. It is for some, but not for everyone.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for that, Dennis.

Assoc. Prof. O'BRIEN — Thank you. Good luck with it all.

The CHAIR — You will get a copy of the transcript in a couple of weeks and can correct any typing errors but not matters of fact or substances.

Witness withdrew.