

# CORRECTED VERSION

## RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

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

Dunkeld — 16 May 2006

#### Members

Mr M. P. Crutchfield  
Mr B. P. Hardman  
Mr C. Ingram  
Mr J. M. McQuilten

Mr R. G. Mitchell  
Dr D. V. Napthine  
Mr P. L. Walsh

Chair: Mr B. P. Hardman  
Deputy Chair: Mr C. Ingram

#### Staff

Executive Officer: Ms L. Topic  
Research Officer: Dr P. Chen and Ms C. Tischler

#### Witness

Mr P. McDonald, chief executive officer, Colac Adult and Community Education (affirmed).

**The CHAIR** — Welcome. You would have heard my statement a few times already today.

**The CHAIR** — I ask that you give us your full name and address and the name of the organisation you are representing and your position within it.

**Mr McDONALD** — My address is [ADDRESS REMOVED] Colac, 3249.

**The CHAIR** — If you can keep your comments as brief as possible, that will give us the opportunity of asking questions at the end.

**Mr McDONALD** — I am CEO of Colac Adult and Community Education, of course based in Colac, which is about an hour from Geelong, an hour and a bit to Warrnambool and an hour and a bit to Ballarat, so we are surrounded by larger regional centres that offer tertiary institutions. We are an adult and community education centre. We offer vocational education and training. We do youth support work. We have disability services. We have youth housing. We work with refugees, particularly the large Sudanese community. Last year we had 1069 students enrolled in programs. Of those, 380 ranged between 15 and 35, and they were doing classes from basic English and literacy and numeracy through to advanced diploma studies.

I should say that the organisation in 1994, when I became involved with it, employed two people, or the equivalent to two and a half people. I was one of those people who came to the rural community in their 30s — I came in my mid-30s — along with the two other people involved. The organisation now employs 65 contracted staff, plus another 50 casual and sessional staff. So bringing young people back to the community was a bonus there.

Colac is probably regarded as one of the most vulnerable communities in the Barwon-South Western region. A Department of Human Services survey had Colac rated no. 1, and the Vincent report in 1999 had it rated 6, so it was very high — 72 per cent of the population in particularly those areas have less than year 12, and about 31.5 per cent have less than year 9 qualifications.

We are a designated neighbourhood renewal area, and 40 per cent of the population live in neighbourhood renewal zones. So out of a population of 11 000 people, about 5000 live in a neighbourhood renewal zone.

I suppose when I was looking at that it was not around solutions — I could not actually think of ongoing solutions — but I was thinking about things like, ‘What are we defining as youth?’. In a lot of the discussion that has gone on before, we were talking, to my mind, of youth as being the 15 to 21 age group, or the school-age group. In my mind rural communities youth are these people who are still involved in sporting clubs and playing football at 35 — and possibly even older — and who are still involved in that part of the community, so I think there is that thing about what we are defining as youth. In my mind anyone under 40 is a young person who we want to attract back into the community.

The other question I was thinking about was: who are we trying to retain? Are we trying to retain those who have the capacity both financially and educationally to move? And, if so, what happens to those who do not have that capacity? If they do not have the capacity, what happens to them if they remain in the community and what happens to the community? There are things around geographical and social stunting, and work skills and job dissatisfaction. It is those things that were being talked about before — of being involved in jobs that are not satisfactory, but there being no opportunities to actually move out.

I will tell you a story. An apprenticeship for a chef was going here at the Royal Mail Hotel. I brought up a young bloke with me about 18 months ago, because I was coming up for a meeting, and they kindly were going to show him around. He came from just outside Colac, and as we got to Camperdown he became geographically lost. Camperdown is 43 kilometres from Colac. He had no idea where we were. I apologise for the language, but I want to quote him verbatim. As we came towards Dunkeld and we spotted the Grampians he said, ‘Shit! What are they?’. He had no idea that the Grampians existed. He is one of those people who are being retained in the community because he has no capacity to get out, so what is that then doing to the community on an ongoing basis?

There are also issues that I see around the systemic issues regarding education applied learning versus targeted tertiary outcomes. It has probably been discussed ad nauseam that schools tend to want to target tertiary outcomes rather than possibly using applied learning and setting up better systems within education to move young people into workplaces and a variety of careers.

The statistics show 380 people under 35 coming to our organisation, and particularly the young people — out of that, there were 200 aged less than 24. There was a disengagement with traditional teaching methods and the lack of innovation. Demographically our schools — and I can use Colac as an example — are populated by 50-plus teachers, and a lot of them have been there for 30 years, so their modelling is very different to what the young people are looking for, so the innovation and diversity of education is not occurring because — and I am sorry to say it — a lot of them are looking for 54 and 11 months and are not interested in actually committing to the long term.

Then there is what employers are saying they want from young people. We did a lot of work in Colac on that. They surveyed all these employers, and employers were saying, 'We actually want young people who have good communication skills, a work ethic, can work as part of a team and show up on time. We can teach them the rest'. They said, 'There is a skill shortage in building and construction', so we immediately had two TAFE colleges and another group say, 'We will run pre-apprenticeship training for building and construction'.

Both TAFE colleges required at least 15 students to run it, so all of a sudden we had the capacity for 30 people to do building and construction. Someone said, 'We had better talk to the builders to find out what the employment opportunities are'. There were six potential jobs, but everyone had latched onto this one skill shortage area, so we then had no coordination. We had gone from having nothing to everyone offering general construction. The CFMEU was offering general construction training, so there was a whole range of things. There is that thing about the coordinated approach.

I suppose there is the whole notion of young people being able to make life decisions at school-leaving age. I had no idea what my career was going to be until — — I still do not! I turn 50 next year and I still do not know where it is going. I have probably had 15 jobs since I left school at 16, and all of those have developed over life experience and work experience rather than probably traditional education, even though I have gone to university and have a range of qualifications. There is what work life expectations will be in comparison with what employers and their education expectations are, so what is a work life going to be like compared to what they have been told at school and what an employer expects, and how do we match those things up?

A few of the final points were around what Mike was saying. What is the purpose of retaining young people in rural communities if there is no clear plan? And if we have a purpose, how do we set it up structurally so that it is sustainable into the future? I do not think it can be reliant on government funding. Things can be put in place as short-term fix-ups and funding can be put in. Sure they can get something going, but can it be maintained in the long term to continue to bring young people back into communities or retain them in communities.

If it is an ongoing thing that always requires topping up with funding, it is not sustainable in the long term. If you are looking at planning out to the year 2030 and the change in demographics, how are we going to do that when it is clearly indicating that most of these small communities are going to be 55-plus? Are we going to attract young people?

I suppose mine was not solutions; it was more questions in some ways. But I think they are things that still need to be addressed, and I do not think in the long term there are simple short-term solutions. They need to be ongoing and sustainable, and in the end communities have to own them. They have to be the ones prepared to do the work to continue to attract and maintain young people, not government.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you.

**Mr MITCHELL** — I have a couple of questions. Do you think young people are encouraged to take up leadership roles in the community?

**Mr McDONALD** — No. I have had conversations with our local council. They have a youth council, which is predominantly made up of school captains and prefects from the senior secondary colleges. There is not a notion of how to bring young people through into leadership roles. I have an issue in an organisation where the average age of my work force is 45, and I do not have any succession — young people coming through. I am trying to develop leaders who will come through there, but it is not a well-grounded thing of bringing young people through.

**Dr NAPTHINE** — Peter, if you did turn your mind to solutions — and I have known you for many years; you are a man of vast experience — what sort of things would you see that communities like Colac should be doing?

**Mr McDONALD** — I think it is the notion around in-place solutions. It is that government cross — a combination of local, state and federal government saying, ‘What are the best responses to this community, and how do we get them maximised’, rather than putting a project in here and another in there, and suddenly you find you have a commonwealth-funded project that is duplicating components of a state-funded project that the council is trying to set up on its own.

It is actually saying, ‘What is a package for this community’ — it does not matter where it comes from, whether it is local, state or federal government — ‘that is going to help resolve some of these issues?’, rather than little targeted prods here and there that then disappear and are short-term small fixes. I think the community needs to take a broad, strategic look at the future.

I attended a briefing on the launch of *Regional matters — an atlas of regional Victoria 2005*. It has some fascinating stuff in it. There were a lot of people at the briefing, but there was not a single person from the Shire of Colac-Otway or from a range of other services in our shire.

How are they planning to the year 2030? How are they looking at those things? It is all planning for the length of office or for four years, or whatever, rather than there being a long-term approach to some of these things. Where are we going to be and what is our population going to look like in 20 years time? And what do we need to put in place now?

**Mr INGRAM** — Peter, you indicated that Colac is fairly high up on disadvantage in most of the assessments. You touched on a comment about job readiness with young people. I assume your area has very high youth unemployment.

**Mr McDONALD** — It has, yes.

**Mr INGRAM** — Because you are high on those factors — I know some areas in Gippsland are the same — what percentage of those young students who do not go on to tertiary education or go away to university are job-ready? And why are students coming out of the education system not job-ready?

**Mr McDONALD** — It is interesting; we run a VCAL program, and VCE because we are a registered school, and we do not put young people on our VCAL program into work placements for at least 12 to 18 months, because they have not got those skills to be work-ready. I am not sure why, whether it is the total focus on a formal education rather than on a combination of working on what are the life things that you will require. If employers are saying that they want people who are work-ready, show up on time and are good communicators, why are those things not being taught in that manner? I would say that in the alternative — I will not call us an alternative education centre — or a lot in adult education and of possibly TAFEs are far better at applying those sorts of things and teaching not only an academic curriculum but work readiness and the application of what is required for skills in the future. I think that is a change in the way you do things.

**Mr INGRAM** — Peter, you and I both went through an era in education when basically most people could leave school at a fairly early age, without completing year 11 or year 12.

**Mr McDONALD** — Do Intermediate and go straight into a bank.

**Mr INGRAM** — Intermediate and straight into job placements — are the jobs not there for those people? Were the people when we left school more understanding or willing to accept students with less skills? Or is it that the jobs are just not there? I am trying to work out how we did it.

**Mr McDONALD** — I think the required skill level of employers has certainly increased. I have continual conversations, where a part of it is we have a pool of young people in our community who are now below what was traditionally the base skill level. For timber workers the requirement is that it is all done with lasers and computers and the EBA they have with unions says they require a certificate 3 level.

Aged and disability services are now saying the minimum qualification is a certificate 4 level. So there has been a slow bracket creep of what is expected within industry, and at the same time there is a group that is dropping

further and further below. I am not sure how we catch that group up, and I am not sure that schools and the formal education system understand what a certificate 4 or a certificate 3 means and that they are recognised qualifications, nationally recognised as valid qualifications and valid career paths.

**The CHAIR** — Peter, thank you very much for that. You will get a copy of the transcript in a couple of weeks time. You may correct errors but you cannot change matters of substance.

**Witness withdrew.**