

# CORRECTED VERSION

## RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

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

Halls Gap — 16 May 2006

#### Members

Mr B. P. Hardman

Mr R. G. Mitchell

Mr C. Ingram

Mr P. L. Walsh

Mr J. M. McQuilten

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

#### Witnesses

Mr B. Slatter, principal (sworn); and

Ms J. Baird, former student, (affirmed) Marian College, Ararat

**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 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 outside this hearing are not protected by parliamentary privilege. We are an all-party parliamentary committee including an Independent.

Could provide us with your full name and address, the name of the organisation you are representing and your position within that organisation.

**Mr SLATTER** — My name is William Douglas Slatter; I am the principal of Marian College, Ararat.

**Ms BAIRD** — My name is Jessica Kate Baird and I live at [ADDRESS REMOVED] Ararat. I am a former student at Marian College.

**The CHAIR** — If you could please keep your presentation to about 10 minutes, that will provide us with time for questions at the end.

**Mr SLATTER** — I have addressed the points in order. In looking at identifying and examining the factors that influence young people into deciding to remain in or leave the rural community, students who leave school prior to completing year 12 I find in the main go into employment in the local area. This employment is usually unskilled or semiskilled; some of the employment would be apprenticeships. Those who complete year 12, especially those who do the VCE, tend to leave the district for further study, either tertiary or TAFE, or for different employment opportunities than are available locally.

It has been my experience over the last eight years as principal at Marian College that about 80 per cent of our year 12 students leave the district. Our school is a regional school; it covers from Ararat to Stawell to Beaufort, so that is the district I am referring to. I believe this is in the main due to us having raised the aspirations and expectations of young people. There has been a very big push from both federal and state governments to improve the retention rate in our schools that is keeping as many students as possible on to complete year 12, either VCE or VCAL.

We have done this task well. Eight years ago we had 30 students complete year 12, this year we will have 49 complete year 12 for similar year 7 numbers entering. And as I said, most of those will leave the district. I think these students who complete year 12 have made a real commitment to and investment in their future career pathways. For them to go into employment locally after leaving year 12, in some ways they could have done that at the end of year 10 so they would see that as wasting the investment of the extra two years they have put in.

Jess is able to talk about the situation where a student has remained in the district but Jess is similar to several other students who are still here from last year's year 12, who have taken a gap year, who are continuing in most cases in the casual employment they have had since about age 15 and using this year to get money to go either off to university or overseas or things like that. I will let Jess answer any questions you might have about that. In summary, I believe young people leave the region mainly for further study or for better employment prospects.

The second area you are looking at is the factors that influence young people in deciding whether or not to return. I believe that most young people who leave the district bear it no ill will. I do not think they are getting away from Ararat because they do not like living here, or Stawell for that matter. I do not think it is a case of them taking the opportunity to get away because they do not like being here. If the district provided them with what they wanted, they would be likely to return.

However, there is no doubt that the larger cities can present them with a particular lifestyle that is unable to be matched to the same level here — there are real attractions. My comments are all due to recent conversations I have had with year 12s or year 12s over the past few years. In recent conversations I have had with this year's year 12 students they tend to have similar intentions for the next few years: four years tertiary study, get a job at the end of their course, settle into a relationship — in fact, the majority intend not to get married or have children until they are about 30. A lot of them want overseas or Australian travel.

Staying in Ararat is not very high on the list of things they are intending to do. For most of them this is an 8 to 10-year plan they have roughed out. It may bear no real relationship to what they end up doing but that is what their plan is at the moment. Given that that is what is sort of causing them to look away, what would influence these young people to return?

For most, a relationship with someone still living here — a boyfriend, girlfriend who has not moved away often brings them back. A job here in their area of training is the main thing that would bring them back — if there was employment at the end of their tertiary course. What attracts them back is they know the area well, they know the people, they know the businesses and things like that. For the majority, their families still live here and that is an attraction to bring them back.

The third point concerned developing strategies or steps that might be taken to increase the number of people who decide to remain or return. My feeling is that the main thing that would retain young people would be to have tertiary courses much closer to home that appeal to them, that cover the range of areas they are looking at. Living away from home to attend university is a great expense, usually borne by the parents. If there were a greater number of choices in, say, Horsham, Ballarat or Warrnambool, they would probably still see Ararat and Stawell as their home and would commute to uni, maybe not daily but certainly they would come home on a weekend and would retain that connection with the town.

They certainly would remain connected to their family and they would remain connected to things like sporting clubs. That is often a big thing that will bring young people back into the town — to play football or netball with their local team on the weekend. Also, a wider range of TAFE courses available at the Ararat and Stawell TAFEs might help students to remain here to do their further training and their learning.

In terms of what gets young people to return, it would have to be employment. There needs to be a variety of employment prospects that matches the level of training and skills they have gained while they were away. We see this at the moment in areas such as education and health where there is quite good employment in the district. I have employed 28 teachers in the last eight years and the great majority are people who have completed their secondary education in country schools. It is very rare for a Melbourne person really to want to come out to the country, but country people will. They have an obvious affinity with the country and a desire to work in a country school. Their experiences of country schools have been positive. That is just from an education perspective but I believe if there were more employment opportunities for these trained and qualified young people, they would be attracted to come back here.

If the employment options were available, then other things that would become important as to whether they would come to this sort of area are the local services that are available — doctors, hospitals, schools. I am finding that especially as people are thinking in terms of having families themselves, they are looking for the services they need to have a young family with. When I have been interviewing staff, it is those sorts of things that make up their mind whether they will even look at a job in Ararat.

As I said, those are the things I have picked up from talking to students over the years or my observations over the last eight years. I need to declare my hand: I am a country boy through and through. I have never lived in Melbourne and have no desire ever to live in Melbourne. When I am looking for employment in a country area, I am looking for things, once again, which meet my training, expertise and skills and things like that. I do not know if Jess wants to say anything.

**Ms BAIRD** — I do not have anything in particular to add. From my experience, the reason I did not go to uni was I had had a job since I was 15 and had the opportunity to take that job up casually for this year. I took that as an opportunity to get money so that next year I can travel. I do hope to get to uni but I am not much of a city girl. I know from friends who have gone to uni this year that it is very hard for them to come back once they have gone because they grow attached to the lifestyle they have and for them to get home on the weekends is impossible. I do not really have anything in particular to add to what Mr Slatter said. That is just my experience.

**The CHAIR** — Are you thinking now about a career without going to university or utilising local training options and that sort of thing?

**Ms BAIRD** — With the position I am in, I work at the local chemist and I am doing training with the chemist. However, I do hope to go to uni and do a course.

**The CHAIR** — Would you choose a regional university?

**Ms BAIRD** — Country. I prefer to be out in the country.

**Mr INGRAM** — What course?

**Ms BAIRD** — Nursing, along that health line.

**Mr WALSH** — In evidence this morning in Dunkeld we heard from the adult, community and further education sector and the LLEN people that there was a concern that a lot of kids were coming out of school and into the job market but were not what they called employment ready. As I understand it, principals and schools are judged by their retention rate of children to year 12 more so than other factors.

Is there a case that potentially we should change the focus on that to something like using the On Track data — children successfully employed two years after they have left school might be a good criteria to put in there apart from just retention rates, which seems to give the wrong market signals sometimes?

**Mr SLATTER** — It does. It is one of the criteria that the Catholic Education Commission uses for determining the success of the school. We have various indicators that they use, and one of them is our retention rate. Mine is only 80 per cent so I get a red light for that. The Victorian certificate of applied learning is a classic example. We started last year with 13 VCAL students, went into this year with 5.

Some might see that as a failure but they all got jobs due to the structured workplace learning they had as part of their VCAL so I see it as a success. Anything that sees the big picture to be rating schools against, I would be all in favour of. I think chasing retention rates as the indicator of success is not helpful. As I said, in a way I think it has caused students to have aspirations beyond remaining in the district. They have been pushed to remain on to year 12. They have got their year 12 and think, 'What do I do now?' and they look beyond the district rather than within the district. So I agree with you, I would like to see something other than retention rates being an indicator of success.

**The CHAIR** — Aren't they talking these days about year 12 or its equivalent as a rule which could mean an apprenticeship or a traineeship rather than just staying on to do VCE and that sort of thing?

**Mr SLATTER** — Certainly we have students doing school-based apprenticeships and, as I said, VCAL and VCE so they stay on our books, if you like. They are seen as students but once they leave our school and go off to do an apprenticeship they no longer are seen as part of us so we have lost them from the system. So although retention into training as a whole is measured for a particular school, as I said we end up with a red mark against our names because of that.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you very much.

**Mr INGRAM** — Bill, you made much in your comments about the terms of reference of the inquiry. Should we be trying to maintain young people in country areas and what is the problem? You seemed to focus directly on that. I would like an overall view of what our aim should be.

**Mr SLATTER** — You said, 'What is the problem?'. We cannot keep pumping every 18-year-old out from the district year after year. We are starting to see primary school enrolment numbers declining quite dramatically in rural areas. In the Catholic system alone three primary schools closed last year in the Ballarat diocese and more are scheduled to close in the next two years. The age group is disappearing. The population of Ararat and Stawell is increasing but it is increasing with people predominantly in their late fifties, making the tree-change. They take their superannuation and sell their house in Melbourne and buy the same house here.

I think the problem is that we have lost a whole section of our demographic. Looking at the last census figures, 20 to 30-year-olds are almost non-existent. It is negative population growth and quite a significant dip in the population around this whole area. That is the problem. The age group that has the children are not living here. I must admit that I despair. Where will we be in another 15 or 20 years time if we keep doing the same thing; if they keep leaving and do not come back; rurally we will be a drained society.

**The CHAIR** — Jess, is there anything we should change to make young people want to come back? There are obviously going to be career opportunities because population needs people to provide services. Do you

think anything needs to change within the rural communities that will make those people want to come back and raise their families and live in rural communities?

**Ms BAIRD** — I do not know how to answer that. I think the main thing is that people who are brought up in this area feel that once they go, it is much harder to come back because the employment opportunities are not here once they get their degrees. There is nothing here for them to come back to. They do not have the opportunity to come back and live here and get money. If they have their degrees, they can live in Melbourne where they can get a job. When they have money, they can raise their family there but they do not have an opportunity to come back here and do that. There is just not a broad range of opportunities for employment once they have their degrees.

**Mr MITCHELL** — I have heard on a couple of different occasions, and I would be interested to get both of your points of view on this, that if kids do not move away, and do not go to university and do not do all of those things, they consider they have failed, which is sad. Do you experience that in Ararat? Do you find that happens?

**Mr SLATTER** — I have not seen it being labelled as failure. They choose a particular path for their life and I think most of the students I have had anything to do with accept people's choices. Students who are going onto the family farm are going into a family business, and things like that. They are all positive directions to be moving into. I have not heard much about students who say that someone is a failure because they have remained behind in town. Have you heard those sorts of comments?

**Ms BAIRD** — I know people probably feel more of a failure if they do not get the ENTER score they may want to get to go where they want to go. You may feel you have let yourself down, you have no opportunities, you cannot go anywhere. How are you going to get where you want to go? I think that is when people might feel a bit of a failure.

**Mr MITCHELL** — There is pressure these days because you want more or you want to get further, and you have to have that.

**Ms BAIRD** — Yes.

**Mr MITCHELL** — That has come across in a few of our hearings. People have said there is that perception there but that leads to problems further down the track as well as having side effects. I was wondering whether you come across that very often?

**Mr SLATTER** — I have not seen much of that. As I said, most people would respect somebody's choice to remain but there are probably a couple of students each year who have been left with no real option but to remain behind, so they may think they have let themselves down — maybe. If only they had tried that bit harder. If only they had taken an apprenticeship, and so on. At the end of year 12 they are 18 years old and they are competing for apprenticeships against people who are 16 years old so they have almost committed themselves to an education path. I guess if they let themselves down, then they may see themselves as failures.

**Mr INGRAM** — Do you see any major barriers to accomplished students reaching their potential in either academic or employment opportunities? Are they different to what a Melbourne-based student would have?

**Mr SLATTER** — Do you mean post-secondary?

**Mr INGRAM** — Yes.

**Mr SLATTER** — It is a real challenge financially for them to go to university, especially Melbourne-based universities. As I said earlier, initially most of the costs of getting them into university are worn by their families, so it is very hard. The living-away expenses are very hard. A Melbourne-based student can catch a different train or tram and end up at the university as opposed to the secondary school they went to the year before.

A country-based student has to find accommodation away from home. Jess was saying to me on the way here that it was a consideration for her looking at a course in Horsham because her grandmother lives there and she would have somewhere to stay. It is all of those sorts of things that can change where you look to go to university: 'I have somebody I can live with so it is cheap', or 'I have to go to Melbourne. Do I go into halls of residence?'. Most would go into student accommodation for 12 months because at least there is somebody there to look after them

until they find friends and move into a house or whatever. It is quite a big disincentive for students to move away to go to university.

Once they make that move they often hang in there a lot better. I think you would have to talk to the tertiary institutions but I think once they get past that first two or three months the country students tend to hang into a course pretty well. I do not find terribly many of our past students who drop out part of the way through a year. Once they have made that commitment and they get past the March HECS withdrawal date, they tend to stay on and complete a course. But it is an initial disincentive for them.

In terms of secondary school options, I still believe they get as good an education in any of our local schools as they would anywhere else. Their options are still wide open. We have had students going into veterinary medicine and things like that. We have quite a number of students who leave at the end of year 9 to go to boarding school, and that hurts. Somewhere in the order of 10 per cent of our students go off to boarding schools at the end of year 9. That is often a family thing where there is a history of going to boarding school, especially with some of the old farming families. But there is a perception in parents' minds that their chances of getting on in the world are better if they go away to a boarding school, so that can be an element as well.

**Mr MITCHELL** — Do you think metropolitan education facilities have a good understanding of the challenges faced by kids coming from rural areas moving to the city? It is a great culture change.

**Mr SLATTER** — The ones that have halls of residences are very good. They usually have people set up in their residences to look after country students because of that whole lifestyle change and everything like that. Within that component of universities I would say yes, but across academia I do not know that a university lecturer is necessarily going to know or even care whether a student is from the country or the city. I cannot speak for them, so it is a bit hard.

**The CHAIR** — Bill and Jess, thank you very much for coming along today. You will receive a copy of the transcript in a couple of weeks and you may correct any errors but not change matters of substance.

**Mr SLATTER** — Thank you for inviting us.

**Witnesses withdrew.**