

# CORRECTED VERSION

## RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

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

Melbourne — 29 May 2006

#### Members

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#### Witness

Prof. J. Wyn, director, Youth Research Centre, University of Melbourne (affirmed).

**The CHAIR** — Welcome, Johanna. 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 Parliamentary Committees Act, granted immunity from judicial review. I also wish to advise witnesses that any comments made by them outside the committee's hearings are not protected by parliamentary privilege. We are an all-party parliamentary committee, including an Independent member, and we are hearing evidence today into the inquiry into retaining young people in rural towns and communities. Would you please give us your full name and address, the name of the organisation you are representing today and your position in that organisation and then please make an affirmation.

**Prof. WYN** — I am Johanna Gerhardina Wyn, I live at 25 Kendall Street, Elwood, and I am the director of the Youth Research Centre at the University of Melbourne. Thank you for this opportunity. I have short comments on each of the three questions that this inquiry is addressing.

The first is identifying and examining the factors that influence young people in deciding to remain in or leave the rural communities in which they reside. I am basing my comments here on a longitudinal research study that has tracked Victorian youth. We began to track them when they left secondary school and they are now in their mid-30s, so we have a very interesting story. A part of the story I want to tell you very briefly is that we are seeing evidence of what we call a new adulthood being forged by this generation as they negotiate very new economic, political and social realities. In particular these include an unstable and uncertain labour market in which contracts are short term and in which companies are subject to unpredictable changes relating to globalisation — all sorts of things like that.

We have identified several key characteristics of the new adulthood, and for our purposes here today they include the recognition by young people of the need to be flexible, to keep options open and to be proactive. They believe these capacities will ensure their survival in uncertain conditions. For many young people rural communities just do not provide the range of educational and employment options that enable them to build a flexible profile for themselves.

Young people have traditionally left rural areas to have better opportunities, but what is different in the 2000s is that the conditions of life and employment create an imperative for young people to be mobile and flexible in the face of labour market uncertainty and to have options that enable them to re-evaluate their plans and directions. The density of educational and employment opportunity that exists in larger towns and cities enables young people to do this. To the extent, though, that rural communities can recognise the need to work across sectors and jurisdictions to provide more flexible pathways and opportunities for young people, some will choose to remain.

Secondly, I wanted to address the factors that influence young people in deciding to return or stay. First of all I have to say I think this is a fairly under-researched area. In our study of Victorian youth, young people tended to leave the rural areas and few opted to remain or return. But there is a group who have placed a high priority on staying or returning to their rural community, and I am perhaps echoing the words I heard from the previous person here. There is a real issue about balance in life. That is a key issue for this generation, and opting to live in a rural community can offer exactly the right mix of lifestyle opportunities that these young people are looking for.

I have a couple of case studies of young people who wanted very much to stay in a rural town because they felt they could make a difference, and I think that it is a bit of a theme. If you have grown up in the country you understand the specifics. Our example is of a young woman who ended up doing a PhD in psychology. She was absolutely determined to get a job in a rural community — not the one she was from necessarily, but to go back into a rural community to practise as a psychologist because she felt she understood the kinds of struggles that folks in rural communities may face, and she really wanted to go there to make a difference. There is also a group of young people in our study who have stayed in rural towns and basically put together a mix of — if they are not professionals — jobs. One of them I am thinking of had three casual jobs going at once just so he could stay in that town. I think there was a sense of struggle, though, about being able to make it work.

Thirdly, I wanted to make some comments about strategies and recommendations on steps that might be taken. I think that there is some really good thinking going on right now about creating better educational options. There are a number of ways in which secondary schools and TAFEs can offer the range of options that are closer to what you might get in the city if they stopped all trying to do the same thing — so some form of specialism and sense that there are networks across the rural communities seems to be a very positive way to go to give that sense of options.

VCAL has provided some really important opportunities as well. I give a case study in my notes of the situation at Mansfield Secondary College. I will very briefly describe that. When VET in Schools placements were initiated 12 years ago, Mansfield was a town with very limited opportunities for young people, and most of them tended to leave and attend university or some sort of educational option or work outside. The school began to develop partnerships with local employers to offer work placements as part of the VET in Schools program, and over the years a very significant range of partnerships has developed.

There are new apprenticeships for students in year 10, 11 and 12 programs which enable young people to stay in the area by providing work-ready skills and certificates and providing work-ready young people to fill labour shortages in that area. That is the key: there is no point in training them to fill shortages that exist elsewhere or nowhere.

A case study is Daniel, who was thinking of leaving school after year 10, as he could not concentrate and he preferred to do something more practical. He enrolled in VCAL and two school-based new apprenticeships. Now he spends one day a week in winter and two days in summer at the local nursing home as part of his certificate III in community services aged care. He spends another two days a week in winter as a snowboard instructor at Mount Buller as part of his certificate II in outdoor recreation. His academic training for the certificate III in community services is provided by GO TAFE in Wangaratta by an instructor who comes to the nursing home to deliver his work tasks. La Trobe Institute of VET provides the training for the certificate II in outdoor recreation.

The residents in the nursing home love to have Daniel around to play cards with and talk to, but Daniel also shares the enjoyment, as he finds that the residents have a lot to talk about and offer. He would love to be a professional snowboarder, and with these certificates and the skills to get work as a professional care attendant, he knows he can get work overseas while he pursues his dream. He may not in the long run stay there, but he is staying there longer than he would have, and he certainly might consider coming back.

In my notes I also documented a number of the ongoing partnerships, some of them around the Central Ranges learning and employment network and others as well in Victoria, that are doing great work in fostering these kinds of programs that support young people to make a bit of a life in their own rural area.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you, Johanna. You have done a lot of work, as I know because of your speaking to us at a breakfast function. In relation to attracting young people back, do you see any particular strategies that would actually assist in doing that? Do you have any real recommendations that you have come across — through your case studies, through following people who have left school and are coming back — that we could recommend to government or recommend in our report to attract people back to rural areas? Do you have any strong views on that?

**Prof. WYN** — I think one of the things that people are looking for when they think of settling in a rural town, especially people who have not lived before in any kind of rural community, is that they would want to be confident that there were opportunities for their children. So I think that the educational innovations that are being talked about and to some extent being put into practice are very important. I think a lot of parents understand that they need greater options for their kids. People no longer think that if you send the first child to a school, you send the second child there as well. No, they want to shop around and see some options. I think that the innovations in education, and particularly in offering flexible options, are very important, not just for keeping kids there but for actually bringing back families who can see it as a viable place to live.

**Mr McQUILTEN** — And business, too.

**Prof. WYN** — Absolutely. Then you get a flow on with businesses because you are getting the skills to support economic activity.

**Mr INGRAM** — You touched on VET in Schools and seemed to imply that, if you like, everyone was trying to do the same things and there was a problem there. I assume you were talking about the school-based apprenticeships, the new tech schools, TAFE and VET in Schools and so on. How do we resolve this, because I think it is a recognition that there is a problem, there is a lack of that skills-based training in schools, and now there seem to be a whole myriad of different directions you could go in.

**Prof. WYN** — I think there are ways forward that are being demonstrated already. In a number of partnerships that are forming, a lot of them are around the local learning and employment networks, but some of

them go beyond that. The key is bringing together your business community, parents and the educational providers and getting a very clear understanding of what skills are needed and where that area is moving economically. It is not just saying, 'Here we are. Let's see what we can do'. It is about being very proactive and pulling the whole team together so that you can inform schools about the kinds of skills that are needed and set up these apprenticeships in the right areas. It is about coordinating.

**Mr INGRAM** — Do you have any research on the barriers or the additional costs for young rural people studying at universities?

**Prof. WYN** — I personally do not, but I believe there is evidence available. In 1999 I did a nationwide study into factors influencing the higher education choices of Australia's rural families and children. Basically finances were a huge issue. I do not have up-to-date figures on that, but it is extremely off-putting for many of the poorer families to consider the costs of accommodation and fees that are required to go into the city. As well as that, in the study I did a lot of the families had been through a period of hardship economically, and the concept of going into debt to get your tertiary education is quite a tough one. It may be okay if you are used to living in a city where you have lots of options and you can pick up something here and there, but for a lot of the rural families, this was a very fearful thing to do. So it was not as viable an option as some people might think to do it on HECS, as it used to be called.

**Dr NAPTHINE** — Have you done any research to say whether we should be trying to retain young people in country towns? Is it a good or bad thing for young people to remain in country towns, or should we make it that those who want to go, go, and those who want to stay, stay, and the dynamics work it out?

**Mr INGRAM** — He is an economic rationalist.

**Dr NAPTHINE** — I am concerned that if we create a perception that we should not allow young people to leave country towns, that that is terrible. We might stifle those young people and create a worse situation.

**Prof. WYN** — Yes.

**Mr McQUILTEN** — Like country detention centres.

**Mr MITCHELL** — With fences around the towns.

**Prof. WYN** — We should not ask, 'How can we keep young people in the town?'. I think we should say, 'How can we make opportunities for young people to be living in the way they want?'.

**Dr NAPTHINE** — Absolutely.

**Prof. WYN** — There should be an option. I think it would be absolutely terrible if we did not have that option. There is a sense that as the rural economy is changing, opportunities are drying up for young people to be able to stay in country towns. They should not have to — it really should be an option — and perhaps we would want to say that we would have some control over that to make it happen.

**Dr NAPTHINE** — The reason I asked the question is when we read the inquiry terms of reference, the instruction is to inquire into retaining young people in rural towns. I have a real concern about that giving a perception that it should be a government or a parliamentary objective when really what we should be doing is providing an opportunity for young people in country towns to have an enormous range of choices.

**Mr MITCHELL** — Isn't that what this is all about?

**Dr NAPTHINE** — That is not what it says.

**Mr MITCHELL** — Isn't that the option — trying to find those who want to stay?

**Mr INGRAM** — We can have this debate after.

**Dr NAPTHINE** — I was asking about what research had been done.

**Prof. WYN** — I personally think it is a good debate to have. I have had a lot of folks in rural communities say to me, 'Can you come and talk to us about how we can keep young people in rural towns?'. It does make it

sound like you are going to build a fence around it and not let them out. We are a youth research centre. We do a lot of work listening to young people. They want to be out there and want to do all the things they think everyone else is doing; they want to have those opportunities. Of course you would not want to stop that.

**Mr MITCHELL** — We have heard a bit of evidence around the state suggesting that there is a problem in that if kids do not go away and experience life, then they are treated as a failure, or they go to university for six or eight months, do not like it and suddenly they are out of their world in a new world. They come back and there is that problem there. They suffer with depression and bad self-esteem. Have you done any work to look at how that affects the way that young kids are thinking if they decide to leave?

**Prof. WYN** — Some of the young people in our longitudinal study have found it almost too challenging to make it in the city and have gone back to their rural area. There are all sorts of challenges, including around mental health, and people need to have that support around them, of people who know them, their family. But I do not know about them being seen as a failure because they have not — we have not sensed that in what they say.

**The CHAIR** — Johanna, thank you very much. You will receive a copy of the transcript in about two weeks. You may correct any errors but you cannot change matters of substance.

**Prof. WYN** — Thank you for the opportunity.

**Witness withdrew.**