C O R R E C T E D V E R S I O N

EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into geographical differences in the rate in which Victorian students participate in higher education

Melbourne — 25 February 2008

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Ms E. Wenn, Director, and

Dr S. Loci, Executive Manager, Measurements and Reporting, Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre.

The CHAIR — I declare this meeting of the Education and Training Committee open, and I welcome Sue Loci and Elaine Wenn from VTAC. This is an all-party joint investigatory committee of the Parliament of Victoria, hearing evidence today in relation to the inquiry into geographical differences in the rate in which Victorian students participate in higher education. I advise those who are making submissions today that all evidence taken by the committee, including submissions, is subject to parliamentary privilege and is granted immunity from judicial review pursuant to the Constitution Act and the Parliamentary Committees Act. I also advise that it is an offence to give false evidence to a parliamentary committee.

It is certainly appropriate to this reference of the committee that we hear from VTAC as we understand that you do a great deal of work, not just in processing applications through to tertiary education but in compiling information in regard to that. We are certainly very pleased to have you here as the first group speaking to this inquiry. We look forward to the contribution you make and to asking questions when you have made a formal contribution.

Ms WENN — Thank you for the invitation. We welcome the opportunity to participate. The invitation we received makes a very detailed request in terms of the breakdown of the information and the extensive range of data you would like us to provide, and we are in the process of preparing that now. We are also in the process of preparing a written submission to accompany that data. Any of the issues or questions that arise out of today we will happily take back and incorporate, if we are not already doing so. What I wanted to provide for you today, on advice, is a short presentation as to the role of VTAC and the functions and responsibilities we have. I will also take the opportunity to give a very high-level overview of some of the broader geographical findings that you will get in much more detail from our data.

VTAC is the Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre. We are an unincorporated body established by the tertiary institutions in Victoria purely for the purpose of administering on their behalf the applications and the selection processes for tertiary courses. We had our genesis with the universities to start with, but since that time we have taken on the TAFE colleges and the independent or the private tertiary colleges. Altogether we have 12 universities, 18 TAFE colleges and 32 independent colleges participating in our system.

The important thing to note at the outset is that VTAC does all of the things it does on behalf of the institutions. We do not make selections; we just administer the selection decisions made by the institutions. Each year we handle about 80,000 applications, mainly for undergraduate courses. We handle about 4000 applications for postgraduate courses in education, but the bulk of our business is in relation to undergraduate admission. Approximately 55 per cent of our applicants are year 12 applicants, so there is quite a large number that are the non-year 12 cohort.

In terms of the application process, as you know we calculate the ENTER each year — the Equivalent National Tertiary Entrance Rank — for Victorian year 12 students as they complete their year 12. The ENTER is not a qualification per se, even though it tends to be used as one, but it is an instrument that is solely calculated for use by institutions; it does not have any qualification standing in its own right. As you know, the ENTER is a single overall measure of achievement across all year 12 subjects.

The ENTER is calculated using the results of up to six studies; most of those are VCE studies. The ENTER is calculated using the study scores provided by the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority. When I say up to six studies — there are four that contribute which are what we call the primary four, and then up to two others may contribute at a weighting of 10 per cent. I understand there may be some further discussion on this later, but the study scores that we receive from the VCAA are first scaled by VTAC to take into account the fact that in some subjects it is much more difficult to obtain a high study score that it is in others. I use those words carefully — that it is more difficult to achieve a higher study score; it is commonly interpreted that we are scaling for how difficult the subject is. To a large extent that is true, but the scaling depends more on the nature of the cohort who take that study. If there is a high-achieving cohort taking that study, then the level of competition is high, and because the study scores are rankings, if you are in a high-performing group of people then it is much more difficult to maintain, say, a middle ranking than it is if you are competing in a group of lower performing people. We can come back to that in more detail.

The application and selection process is based on a preference system where applicants can select up to 12 course preferences for any of the courses that are on our database. The application system is entirely an online web-based system. It had its genesis as a paper-based system, but over the years we have gradually evolved so that it is now a totally online system in terms of the applicants who apply through us and in terms of the way in which we put the information back out to the institutions — it is all web-based.

After we have processed all of the applications and analysed the qualifications and all of the other claims that each applicant has made, we put that information up for institutions so that each applicant's details are provided to the selection officers for all of the courses they have applied for. Then the courses themselves go through various processes for selecting which applicants they would like to make an offer to. It is quite a complex process; it is a bit like an electronic auction before the final offers are done and dusted, but basically we go through a number of iterations whereby all of the courses say, 'I would like these students for these courses'. If more than one course wishes to make an offer to the same person, then the VTAC system will identify the offer which corresponds to the highest preference for that person. If you are offered a course for your first, third and fifth preferences, then you will be offered your first preference by VTAC, and the offers for your third and fifth preferences will lapse and the people at that institution will know that you will not be accepting their offer. That is why we have a number of iterations. It is a bit like an auction.

In terms of selection processes, about 50 per cent of our courses on the database, and we have about 2000 courses across all of the institutions, use the ENTER as pretty much the sole selection criterion. However, those courses also take into account other factors for about 20 per cent of the applicants, and that is what we call the middle band process. In essence, for those courses the institutions go through, I suppose, a two-stepped process. They will look at the list of applicants that they have and then they will be able to say, usually on the basis of the ENTER, 'As far as we are concerned these people here are clearly in; they have met all the requirements, they have met the pre-requisites, their ENTER is sufficiently high enough and we will definitely be wanting to make these people an offer'.

They will then identify another group whereby they will say, 'No, we cannot make these people an offer for various reasons'. But there will be a group who are just below the point at which they are thinking of drawing their cut-off, so to speak, and then they will more closely examine those applicants that are close to that point; and at that point they will take into account some other factors. Those other factors may be performance in individual studies that are relevant to the course. Some institutions will take into account access and equity considerations, regional considerations and so on, but that is what we call the middle band process.

Then of course the other 50 per cent of our courses also use a variety of factors, some of which might include the ENTER, should the ENTER be available, but remembering that often we are dealing with non-year 12 students. There may not be an ENTER or equivalent, and you have a number of courses which take into account, use and rely heavily upon things like auditions, folios, interviews and completion of specially targeted application forms.

The data that we are providing you, as well as the longitudinal analyses and what I am going to talk about now, relate to the 2006–07 admission period — not the one we have just finished; not 2007 for 2008 entry. The reason is that we do not finalise our database until the end of March when we actually get the enrolment and deferment data back from the institutions. At the moment our 2008 processes are incomplete in that we have made the offers, but we have yet to receive data back from the institutions to find out the outcomes of those offers.

When we look at the geographical breakdown of the outcomes of our processes, it will come as no surprise that we have two distinct groups. We have the metropolitan group and we have the non-metropolitan group. Most of our figures would simply reflect population demographics, and I am aware that a lot of them will not be reflecting just the population demographic, but we do not have access to any of that data. I am sure that will be the business of the inquiry, to marry the data that we are able to provide on a geographical basis with your sources from other places. I am just going to give you a snapshot using the statistical regions that VTAC uses in our annual reporting, and that does not go down as far as the LGAs, which is going to be the denominator I suppose for the more detailed analysis.

In terms of the ENTERs, the year 12 results , metropolitan Melbourne provides 73 per cent of all the ENTERs that VTAC processes.

At the regional level, we can say that the non-metropolitan regions have average ENTERs all below the state average, if you take the Victorian state average for the ENTER, except for the Western District, which is slightly above the state average. Four of the metropolitan regions are all above the state average; the outskirts, northern and western suburbs are not.

Mr HALL — What boundaries do you use for your regions if you are not using local government areas? Education department regions?

Dr LOCI — No, it is basically the Australian Bureau of Statistics regions. The only difference is that I use whole postcodes. Where in fact there is a postcode that may be split 50 per cent one region, 50 per cent another, I just assign it to one so it is purely in terms of postcode.

Mr HALL — How many regions are we talking about?

Dr LOCI — There are 10 non-metropolitan and 7 metropolitan. I basically divide the metropolitan into central Melbourne — the city — and then southern suburbs, south-east, north-east, northern, western and then the outer metropolitan.

Mr HALL — Thank you. Sorry for the interruption.

Ms WENN — No, that is fine. The north-eastern suburbs have the highest average; they are 9 whole ENTER points higher than the state average. The western suburbs have the lowest; they are 7 whole ENTER points below the state average. When I am talking about the state average for Victorian applicants, I am talking 63.5 in terms of the average ENTER. Therefore, I am looking at the north-eastern suburbs where their average ENTER is 72.6, nearly 73, whereas when you go out into the regions it is as low as 59, 58, 56 for the western suburbs. There is quite a spread in terms of the average ENTERs on that basis.

Looking at the Victorian school leaver applications — that is, just the year 12 leavers from Victoria who are applying for a tertiary institution — 84 per cent of the year 12 leavers with an ENTER applied for entry in 2007. There are some regional variations: the north-eastern suburbs had a percentage of 88; the northern and western suburbs 89; with the exception of Barwon, Central Highlands and the Western District, the non-metropolitan regions are well below 80 per cent in terms of their application rates, and Ovens-Murray has 74 per cent of their year 12 school leavers applying for courses and Wimmera is at 66 per cent.

Mr HERBERT — Just on Peter's point, you would not have a map of the regions, would you, because I really have no idea what north-eastern is in terms of your districts?

Ms WENN — I should have brought one. I can certainly forward one on.

Mr HERBERT — If you do not, it is okay. It would just make a bit more sense of what you are saying.

Dr LOCI — I just have to find it in my papers. Keep talking while I look for it.

Ms WENN — Okay, I will keep going. School leavers in Melbourne city, Ovens-Murray and Wimmera had the lowest average application rates in the state, but interestingly, in each of those areas, the proportion applying for university as opposed to TAFE or the private colleges was much higher than the state overall. So even though they have lower application rates, they appear to have higher aspirations in terms of whether they want to go to university or to TAFE or to a private college.

In terms of offers, for Victoria on average 83 per cent of applicants receive an offer. That does not necessarily mean it is an offer for their first preference, but it does mean that it is an offer for one of the courses for which they indicated a preference and it indicates the offer made by the institution who is prepared to offer them their highest preference. Sometimes there will be a number of students who apply where their first or even their second preference might be university, but they will end up with a TAFE offer. The reverse does not tend to apply. There is a lot of discussion around the time of offers, as you would be aware, in terms of unmet demand. It is a very difficult concept to try to quantify, because it is very difficult to define what is a university applicant and what is not, when we have applicants giving up to 12 preferences.

Mr ELASMAR — Can I interrupt here: with regard to first preferences, if you apply for, say, any university and you do not get it, and you go and enrol at a different university and then you get it on the second preference, what happens then? Can I go back to the first university I wanted to go to?

Ms WENN — Yes, that may well be the case. We have a number of offer rounds. We have a small early round of offers in December, but that tends to be for the non-year 12s, because the year 12 results and the ENTER results are not out. The main round is in January, then we have a second round later in January and a third round in February. The second round is a small round, usually about 4000 to 5000 offers, and then the final round — that third round — is a small round. Yes, through each of those rounds you might end up with more than one offer.

Across Victoria we have about 83 per cent of applicants receiving offers. Gippsland and Melbourne city have the lowest figures in terms of the offer rate, with 79 per cent and 75 per cent respectively. Interestingly, despite the distributions of ENTER and other things, Ovens-Murray is up there with the north-eastern suburbs and the Western District with the highest proportions of applicants who are actually receiving offers. They tend to be more successful than the state average. Ovens-Murray has got 85 per cent; north eastern suburbs, 86 per cent; and Western District, 88 per cent. That is off an average of 83 per cent.

Finally, I would just like to touch on what our applicants tend to do with those offers and talk about enrolments and deferments. That is where we see some other interesting regional variations. Across the state around 71 per cent of offers actually result in an enrolment. However, again there are noticeable discrepancies. The highest enrolment rate is in Barwon with 66 per cent, and the lowest is in Ovens-Murray with 46 per cent. What that is telling us is that in Ovens-Murray only 46 per cent of offers are likely to result in an enrolment in that course. In the metropolitan areas the range is from 69 per cent in the Melbourne outskirts to 76 per cent in the suburbs. That is quite a marked discrepancy between metropolitan and non-metropolitan.

Finally, once an applicant enrols, in order to accept an offer then the expectation is that you actually enrol in the course. What a number of students do, as we know, is that they will defer their offer. They will accept it and then defer their enrolment. Across the state, about 9 per cent of applicants would defer their enrolment. Again we have a huge difference between the metropolitan and the regional areas in terms of that behaviour. Almost 1 in 6 regional-offered applicants deferred their enrolment in 2007, compared with 1 in 15 for their metropolitan counterparts. When I mentioned the statewide average of 9 per cent deferments, if you put the regions and the non-metropolitan regions together, that percentage is 17.7 per cent against 6.6 per cent in the metropolitan area. Although we have got a number of differences in terms of, I suppose, the starting characteristics of the applicant population across the regions and the outcomes of the selection process across the regions, there would appear to be just as big, if not larger, differences across the regions in terms of what the successful applicants actually do, having received an offer.

That is the synopsis of my very high-level presentation today. As I said, I do not know what your time line is. Looking at the specifications of the data that is required and the analysis that you are going to undertake, it is huge. But I am happy to take any questions or comments now.

Mr DIXON — In the acronym ENTER, 'national' is what the 'N' stands for. I did not realise it was used in every state; or does it not mean that?

Ms WENN — Yes and no; each state has a tertiary entrance rank of some kind. It is calculated in pretty much the same way. The actual rules of putting the subjects together will vary. In Victoria we have called it the ENTER in the spirit of national cooperation, but other states have retained perhaps their original nomenclature. South Australia has a TER, New South Wales has a University Admissions Index, but they are one and the same thing. There is a national process which ensures that all of the tertiary entrance ranks across the states and territories are equivalent, so that if your ENTER in Victoria is 89.5 per cent then that is the ENTER that would apply for New South Wales or Queensland.

Mr DIXON — That was my next question; thank you.

Mr HERBERT — I just have two quick questions on that one. Do you handle out-of-state university applications?

Ms WENN — Yes, we do — interstate and a number of locally-residing international students.

Mr HERBERT — So those figures you have given us are for students who may go to University of Queensland?

Ms WENN — They are only Victorian applicants we have considered for the purpose of this submission. We have taken out international applicants and interstate applicants from these figures.

Mr HERBERT — How would our students going to other universities apply — say, students who are living on the border?

Dr LOCI — Our students would apply through the other Tertiary Admission Centres

Mr HERBERT — Through the other institution.

Dr LOCI — You can apply to Charles Sturt either through VTAC or through UAC, because it is on the border. Central Queensland has a Melbourne campus, so you can apply for the Melbourne campus of it through VTAC, but you cannot apply for a Queensland campus through VTAC.

Mr HERBERT — The other one is, very simply, on those deferment figures, to get an independent living allowance — or living away from home, whatever it is; a couple of hundred dollars a week — you have to have earned $18 000, I think it is. If you go to university and you are living independently, to be eligible for those commonwealth payments I believe you have to earn about $18 000 irrespective of where you live. I was just thinking, would that be the reason for the regional statistic? Presumably if you lived in regional Victoria and you were coming down to study for three years, you would be much better off working for a year, earning more than that $18 000 so that you could pick up an allowance and live independently in Melbourne. Is that a reasonable proposition?

Ms WENN — That is what I have heard anecdotally. We do not have any data to give any analysis.

Dr LOCI — It is a possible explanation, but there is no data.

Mr HALL — Thank you for your presentation; it was very helpful. I am sure we will hear a lot more from you as this inquiry progresses. I appreciate the more detailed data that you will provide, too. You did indicate that was going to be based on local government areas. Did you say you were going to drill it down that far?

Dr LOCI — Yes, so instead of the 17 regions that we have in the annual statistics, you will have 79 local government areas.

Mr HALL — That would be helpful. Just in terms of a couple of process issues, what is the relationship again between the Victorian Curriculum Assessment Authority and VTAC?

Ms WENN — The VCAA provides the study scores — the VCE results — to VTAC, and there is a data transfer there, and we then take the study scores and we scale them and we develop the ENTER from the VCE study scores.

Mr HALL — You turn them into an ENTER score?

Ms WENN — Yes.

Mr HALL — To what level of TAFE programs does VTAC administer?

Ms WENN — We accept from certificate 3 and above in our system.

Mr HALL — So for all the apprenticeships, traineeships and some of the other types of programs that students would study at TAFE, you would not have records of that data, would you?

Ms WENN — We do have some, but whereas we pretty well process all of the applications for universities, TAFE colleges accept a lot more through direct application, and we do not have those numbers, so although our detailed submission will talk about TAFE applications, they do represent a fairly small proportion of the total TAFE colleges, so it is a bit of a long bow for us to try to read too much into our TAFE applications simply because they represent a much smaller proportion of all the TAFE applications.

Mr HALL — On the issue of deferment, does that cause some problems for universities, to your knowledge? Do they over-enrol by that average 9 per cent to accommodate deferment, or can you go back and reoffer a place that has been deferred by a student, or are they too late in the process then?

Ms WENN — Say that last question again?

Mr HALL — If a student at a latter stage decides to defer before 1 March when the course starts, that may miss your third round offers in February and in that case there is a deferred place, and I presume that that is a vacant place. Therefore, I am asking, to your knowledge, do universities deliberately over-enrol by an average figure of, say, 9 per cent with the expectation of having that level of deferment?

Ms WENN — I do not think it would be as precise or as uniform as that, but I really do not have any information to comment on. I do know, though, that their funding for any course is based on the total cohort that they have got in that course at any one time. If it is a four-year course, that includes their fourth year right down to their anticipated first year, so they are taking into account the ones that are moving out at one end and new ones coming in; they are taking into account their own internal transfers from one course to another, transfers in and out of the university part way through courses, and they also take into account the deferred applicants from last year. They do an amount of modelling where they know on average for their particular course that they can expect X per cent of the deferred applicants to actually enrol after their period of deferment, and they would take all of that into account, but as for setting absolute numbers which they might over-enrol by — if they are doing that — you would have to talk to the individual institutions on that one. Every applicant who defers has a fixed deferral period, and that offer then lapses if they have not confirmed their intention to enrol, usually by about December, I think, of the year before the study. So if they are deferring this year, they need to confirm by December, at the end of this year, that they are actually going to take their place in 2009.

Mr HALL — I have a few more questions.

The CHAIR — We will come back to you, Peter. I just wanted to follow up on the take-up of courses. I think you said for metropolitan it is somewhere about 70 per cent who take up the offer once it is made, and then you said for Ovens-Murray it was somewhat below that, was it not?

Ms WENN — Across the state 71 per cent of offers actually result in enrolments.

The CHAIR — And it is significantly lower than that in some regional areas?

Ms WENN — Yes. In Barwon it is 66 per cent, and that represents the highest percentage across the non-metropolitan regions, and the lowest is Ovens-Murray with 46 per cent.

The CHAIR — How might we explain those low take-up figures? Is it because they go on to other tertiary courses that are not part of VTAC, or is it because they get work? I presume there is a mixture, but what is your perception or understanding of the uptake? It seems very low to me, if you apply and you are given an offer and you do not take it up.

Dr LOCI — Historically it has been low.

Ms WENN — And it would be all of those factors. Although we have a vast amount of data it is quite narrow in its parameters, so we do not have any information in terms of applicants who apply directly to universities or TAFE and are made a direct offer. Once VTAC has finished its processing, all institutions that are with VTAC are then freed because part of their agreement is that being part of the system is that they will make all of their offers through VTAC for the courses that they have with us, and that is where the variation with TAFE comes in. TAFE do not put all of their courses through us, whereas the universities do. The private colleges are a bit more like TAFE. They will have some of their courses with us and some not. So once they have put their course with us, there is an undertaking that they will select all of their applicants using the VTAC processes in the first instance, and once the VTAC processes are exhausted in terms of the last round of offers in February, then they are free to make direct offers, so people can just apply directly and may or may not be given an offer.

The CHAIR — The other question I wanted to ask relates to looking at where there are regional campuses of tertiary institutions. Have you got any information that would indicate there was a higher uptake in those regions that have regional tertiary institutions?

Dr LOCI — Not yet, but hopefully I can get the data for you, yes.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Since you have gone online for applications, has there been a drop from any regional or country area?

Ms WENN — No, our data is not showing that. There is no differentiation. Our number of applications does tend to fluctuate a little bit from year to year. We were down on applications across the board this year by about 3000, but last year we had an increase of about 3000 over the previous year, so there are a number of factors at work there. In 2007 the year 12 cohort, for example, was smaller than the year 12 cohort in 2006, and then in terms of the number of applications last year, they were down more than could be explained by the decline in the

year 12 cohort. One can surmise that that is possibly more a reflection of economic and employment opportunities rather than interest or access to tertiary courses.

Mr KOTSIRAS — What do you do to ensure that all the information for courses at universities is sent out to students, that they have access to information about university courses and so on, especially those in country Victoria?

Ms WENN — All of the information that we publish in hard copy is also available online through the website, but we do publish what we call the *VTAC Guide* each year which lists all of the courses, and information about the courses, any prerequisites or any other requirements for enrolment into the course. They go to all of the schools; they are available in the newsagents. In terms of the year 12 cohort, there is a very strong and informed network of careers counsellors who work closely with the students to ensure they have the information, but it is either available in hard copy or on the Web.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Finally, do you have any suggestions on policy changes for government to try to ensure that more unrepresented groups or smaller groups who do not make it to tertiary studies have access?

Ms WENN — That tends to happen through the individual institutions. A number of the universities do take into account regional factors and through their equity and access schemes give some degree of preference to regional applicants.

Mr KOTSIRAS — So there is no role for government to play in this?

Ms WENN — There may well be, but I am unaware of it.

Dr LOCI — The institutions would be in a better position to give you an idea.

Ms WENN — And it might be at the federal government level. There may be some in relation to funding in terms of what is available for regional incentives and so on.

Mr DIXON — I have two quick questions. How is VTAC funded, and are there any trends in deferral? Is there a growing trend?

Ms WENN — I only looked at the deferrals for the year in question, but we will be giving you that information. Sue might be able to find it for you.

Dr LOCI — Overall I will; I will not be able to do it restricting myself just to Victorian applicants or students. I will look it up while Elaine answers your next question.

Mr DIXON — Thank you.

Ms WENN — In terms of funding, approximately 50 per cent of our operating budget, which is about $5 million, is provided by the institutions through their contributions. All of the participating institutions make a contribution towards our operating costs based on a fairly complicated formula which takes into account how many courses they are offering, how many applications they receive and how many offers they make.

Mr DIXON — How hard they work.

Ms WENN — The other proportion of our funding comes through the application fee itself. Each applicant pays a fee when lodging their application.

Mr HALL — We hear a lot about cut-off scores. When a university says to you, 'We want to allocate 100 places for a science degree at our university', do they ask you to pick the first 100 students with the highest ENTER scores or do they say they have got to be available to 65 or whatever? Do they make the cut-off score, or does the number of applicants determine the cut-off score?

Ms WENN — It is a combination of two things. I will deal with courses which are selected on ENTER, because that is where we are talking about cut-offs. Each course will get from us a list of their applicants ranked from highest to lowest in terms of their ENTER. That is their starting point. Many of them will simply say, 'Okay, my quota is 120'. They will go down 120, and that is when they start to make some other judgements, because if

the 120 takes them to an ENTER which is much lower than they want to accept as their minimum required ENTER, then they will have to make some adjustments at that point. They can tell us in a number of ways, but by and large they will say, 'We are going to take down to rank 135'; then they put that information into the system and we process it. But before they do that they will look at individual applicants.

As I said before, they will look at the middle band. Through the middle band process they will look more closely at applicants that are just below the point at which they are thinking their cut-off might be. They will also take into account at that point any quotas — particular sub-quotas — they might be looking to fill in terms of whether they are looking for year 12s or non-year 12s, whether they are looking for women in underrepresented areas and so on. They will look at applicants who have applied under any of the special equity and access programs.

A number of institutions have got their own programs, but there are also provisions within the application process — for example, year 12 students who have suffered some form of long-term illness or misadventure during year 12 might have put in an application to have consideration for the fact that their ENTER score may be lower than it otherwise might have been. They will take those factors into account at that point. They can then simply move people up and down the ranks according to whether they want to make them an offer or not.

Mr HALL — In relation to that, each year we hear of a number of students who are qualified but miss out on a university place. Does VTAC do any calculations in regard to that?

Ms WENN — We provide a number of calculations and statistics on an annual basis. We provide those formally to the Commonwealth department of education — whatever its name might happen to be at the time — and also to the Australian Vice-Chancellors or Universities Australia. We have a formal reporting process, and all of the states and territories report in the same way.

Mr HALL — Is there an ENTER score at which a person is entitled — or is qualified — to go to a university course? What I want to know is how you work out the numbers of unsuccessful students.

Ms WENN — It is a tricky calculation, and it is not one that is without its own politics that others might use our data for. As I said in my opening comments, the concept of unmet demand is a very tricky one. It sounds simple enough but because of the preference system, it is very difficult to say. There are 40 000 students in Victoria who apply for a university course. We can say there are 40 000 who had their first preference as a university course, and we can tell you how many actually got a university course, but it might not be the same students.

Mr HALL — I agree. At the end of this inquiry we might go and work that out. Can I ask about full fee-paying places at universities and also online courses at university level: do you take applications for those as well?

Ms WENN — Yes, we do.

Dr LOCI — Full fee for domestic, — yes; full fee for international, no.

Mr HALL — Say, for example, where you have got a mix of both types — HECS-funded places and self-funded full fee-paying places in the same program; for example the new school of medicine at Monash Gippsland — and a student misses out on a HECS place, how do they determine their next choice for a place as a full fee-paying student? Do they indicate that on their VTAC application?

Ms WENN — Yes, they do. They put that in among their preferences.

Dr LOCI — The course code is unique to either a CSP place or a fee-based place, so if a student really wants a particular course, they can have the HECS place as their first and the fee-based equivalent course as their second preference.

Mr HALL — To clarify a question asked by Mr Elasmar earlier in respect of the first-round applications, if a student has missed out on their first preference and been allocated their second preference, then it is possible on the second round that they may be re-offered their first preference?

Dr LOCI — Yes. They can be offered a higher preference. They will not be offered a lower preference.

Mr HALL — In the ENTER differences by region that you spoke about before there were some significant differences between regions. Were they differences between country regions themselves, or was that purely the difference between metro and country regions as an average? I would have thought that within the metro there is probably just as big a differential and divergence as there is between metro and country as a whole.

Ms WENN — In my presentation today I based it on the 17 that we looked at, and, yes, there is a variation in the metro. In terms of the average ENTER it ranges from the highest at 72.6 per cent, and the lowest at 56 per cent. So that is metro. Then for the regions the lowest is 58 per cent at Goulburn and the highest is Barwon at 62 per cent.

Mr HALL — Can you give us any view on why there is such a difference? I have always said genetically the kids are no less academic.

Dr **LOCI** — I think it has a lot to do with numbers as well — numbers of students involved. The information is based on the home postcode provided on the application form rather than where they actually attend school as well. There can be a difference there. They may well be from Horsham, but they are attending boarding school in Melbourne.

Mr HALL — It would be one of our challenges to try to work out why that exists.

Mr HERBERT — Barwon would have Geelong too, would it not? That is why Barwon is so high..

Ms WENN — Barwon has Geelong Grammar.

Mr HERBERT — It has Geelong which is a major urban centre. It is probably closer to Melbourne than rural.

Ms LOCI — With Barwon, if I am looking at overall numbers of people for whom an ENTER was calculated rather than a Victorian resident who got an ENTER, so I am allowing for international students as well here, there were 2440 people from Barwon who got an ENTER in 2006–07. If I then look down at Wimmera, there were only 385. They definitely have a lot fewer. There is a distribution on the annual statistics of ENTERs by the 17 VTAC regions, and I will be doing a similar thing for LGAs for the applicants.

Mr HALL — Okay, good.

The CHAIR — I come back to that question before that Martin asked in regard to deferrals.

Ms LOCI — Yes. It is very interesting. If I look at the combination of enrolled or deferred over the last three cycles, 77.6, 76.6, 76.5 per cent of offered applicants enrolled or deferred. It is fairly stable. If I look at deferments, it is 11.4, 8.4 and 9. It is almost that there is more of a difference between percentage enrolled and the percentage deferred rather than the enrolled or deferred combined.

The CHAIR — I have one more question in regard to special entry and access schemes. I am trying to understand what examples might apply in terms of students being able to apply for those schemes. I guess there is a broad range, some offered by different universities and so on, but I am interested to get a bit of a feel for them.

Ms WENN — We have a total of nine categories, and those categories actually include commonwealth scholarship applicants as well. The sorts of categories that may be taken into account include mature age, non-English speaking background, indigenous, family circumstances, socioeconomic background, rural or isolated and under-represented schools. Then there are specific programs such as the RMIT school network access program where they are targeting specific schools; women in non-traditional courses; and personal disability and medical conditions. There is a broad range of categories under which applicants might apply.

The CHAIR — And we will get some more information about that in terms of what percentage of the actual applicants might get in under that, will we?

Ms WENN — Yes, that is available. In broad terms we have about 10 000 applicants who will put in a claim for one or more of those categories each year, plus about 1700 year 12s who will put in an application. But that is the only information that we can give you in relation to special equity and access, because we simply pass

the applications on to the institutions. We do not know what decisions they make in relation to that, and we do not get any feedback in terms of what might or might not have been taken into account.

Mr HERBERT — Just on that briefly, in terms of non-ENTERs, at what age? Is it at 25 you apply for help in there? At what point does the ENTER become irrelevant in people's journey through life post-year 12?

Ms WENN — In terms of the ENTERs that we give, it is basically just for the year 12 leaver cohort that that information is passed on in terms of the way in which we present the applicants to the institutions. There may well be 19, 20, 25-year-olds who do have a tertiary entrance rank, and that information will be available on each applicant's record for the institution to look at, but we do not present those students as part of the rank lists on their ENTERs. We only use the current ENTERs for the rank lists.

The CHAIR — All right. That might do us for the moment, thank you very much. We will look forward to getting the information you present us with later on and trying to make some sense of that, and then perhaps coming back to you with further questions in one way or another in future.

Ms WENN — Thank you very much, and thank you for the opportunity.

Witnesses withdrew.

C O R R E C T E D V E R S I O N

EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into geographical differences in the rate in which Victorian students participate in higher education

Melbourne — 25 February 2008

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Professor R. Teese, director, centre for post-compulsory education and lifelong learning, faculty of education, University of Melbourne.

The CHAIR — Welcome to our committee. We understand you are from the centre for post-compulsory education and lifelong learning at the University of Melbourne where you have done a great deal of research in a broad range of areas on student pathways and so on. We are certainly very interested to hear what you have to say.

Welcome to the Education and Training Committee. Our inquiry, as you would understand, is on geographical variations as they impact upon tertiary studies. Just in terms of this inquiry, as you speak to us I hope you are aware that the information you present is subject to parliamentary privilege and is granted immunity from judicial review pursuant to the Constitution Act and the Parliamentary Committees Act. I should also advise you that it is an offence to give false evidence to a parliamentary committee, but I am sure that is not going to happen in any case. We look forward to what you have to share with us in view of your understanding of our inquiry and we look forward to asking some questions following your talk to us.

Prof. TEESE — I have been through the terms of reference. Thank you for the opportunity to present some information to the committee. It is a timely and valuable exercise and I welcome the opportunity to contribute to it. I have not prepared a formal submission, but I have come equipped with a range of information which I hope will be easily digested and can make copies of some of the charts available at an appropriate time. Things are a bit busy at work, so I have not really been able to write a nice, elegant discussion, but I will try to address the terms of reference as ably as I can.

In your invitational letter you asked me to point to key research findings in relation to uneven participation in higher ed. Can we perhaps go through some summary on that to begin with. I guess the most marked feature that we observed, both in Victoria and elsewhere, are country-city differences, and these are quite large. If we look at aspirations for any form of tertiary education, about 84 per cent of year 12 students in Victoria will put their hand up for a tertiary place in a middle level TAFE or higher education course. By comparison in country Victoria the figure is 72 per cent. So the aspiration level for tertiary education in country Victoria is decidedly lower, as is the case in poorer suburbs of Melbourne. But the factors are complex, as we will see as we work through.

In country Victoria also the aspiration for tertiary education is more conservative in the sense that it relates to university rather than middle level TAFE. This is an issue because middle level TAFE is one of the more accessible options available to people and can form a useful bridge to higher ed, so neglecting the middle level TAFE option can contribute to lower participation in higher ed as well as reducing the supply of skills at technician-supervisory level.

Can we talk a little bit about why aspirations in the country are lower than in the city. We have investigated that through the On Track survey and through other sources of data, inviting young people to comment on why they do not aspire to further education once they have completed their schooling, without implying that everybody should go to university or even middle level TAFE. We are not making an assumption about that. We think choice is really important, and economic realities have to be dealt with.

The comments of students in the survey program are that, firstly, there are significant economic and financial barriers, and those are invariably chosen as motives more often by country students than by city students, and it is quite a large margin. The economic factors relate to, 'I have to earn a living'. There is more poverty in country Victoria. There are a lot of families on low incomes. It is a stretch and a very demanding effort to set aside everything and go into university. There is also an issue of risk aversion to debt. The economic and financial factors are significant. The economic factors include the opportunity costs of going into higher education instead of going to work, and then there are direct cost factors relating to fees or debt and associated expenditure.

There are also cultural issues in country districts. There is a long tradition of early entry to work and of promotion through experience on the job. We cannot overlook the cultural side of things. It is not mainly an academic problem. Young people in country Victoria are not poorer achievers than young people in the city, though underachievement is an issue in all areas. The lower aspirations in country Victoria for higher education also reflect higher dropout rates from school. Early leaving in Victorian schools is much higher in country regions and in poorer suburbs of Melbourne than in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne — east and south. The higher dropout rate in country regions means that the kids who do stay on are more conservative in their aspirations. They are the more academic group who survive. I do not mean conservative in a negative sense but more old-fashioned, if you like, only seeing university as the way to go. That is on the aspiration side.

The economic precariousness of country students is also highlighted by the rate at which they defer their studies; this is much higher than in the city, and I can give you exact details of that later on. Country students also are less successful in their pitch for a university place if they do apply for one. They more frequently get no offer. That requires a lot of detailed work to understand. Is it that their aspirations are misplaced; do they choose the wrong courses; are they uncompetitive for the courses that they do choose? These are complicated issues, but we cannot start with the assumption that the kids in the country are dumber than the kids in the city. They are not. But the fact is that their non-offer rate is substantially higher than the non-offer rate in the city — for example, in country Victoria between 13 and 20 per cent of higher education applicants are refused an offer, depending on particular regions within the country, whereas the range in the city is between 4 and 13 per cent. Why? That is an issue. So it is not only the lower aspirations, it is, 'When I do put my hand up I am more frequently refused'.

On the other hand country kids are more likely to reject the places that are offered to them. This is a little-known aspect of opportunity for higher education, but the rate of rejection of offers is much higher. In the country between 16 per cent and 25 per cent of all applicants who receive an offer reject it, compared to 10 to 21 per cent in the city. I have just done these calculations very quickly, but those are my estimates. Rejection involves: I get an offer in the mail or over the internet which says, 'Great! Here is your place', and I do nothing about it, or, in a few cases, I roll up to the institution and enrol but I am gone before the census. Discontinuation is also higher amongst country students who do enter a university. The rates from our longitudinal study show that 18.5 per cent of country kids who begin a university degree course will discontinue it within two years compared to 12.3 per cent of city kids. So the attrition is higher.

Can we just go back through those points one by one. The aspiration levels are lower. They sit on reduced, lower use of school in the first place, as measured by retention. So the aspirations are lower, the aspirations are more conservative, the offer rates are lower, the rejection rates are higher and the discontinuation rates are higher. The factors behind these phenomena are both economic and academic. The economic factors are opportunity costs and direct costs associated with higher education. The academic factors include perception of the range of courses available, perception of the suitability of the courses that are there. In some cases it is teaching or nursing or nothing — very exciting prospects for a traditional male view of the world, which might be an argument for broadening the view, but while we wait for that to happen, other things might be done.

There is conservatism in the view of students who do not say, 'Why don't I do a two-stage strategy — go to TAFE, then go to university?'. There is a lack of vision in that area and possibly a lack of forward thinking on the part of TAFE institutes, although not all TAFE institutes are quiet on this front. We have many good TAFE institutes in Victoria who are very active in extending higher education provision and building bridges. Is that the case in the country? In the country we have some of the most enterprising TAFE institutes in Australia — e.g., at East Gippsland — but in the culture of young people that has not sunk in, and maybe it has not sunk in in the culture of our secondary schools in the country either, which are still handing out very conventional, old-fashioned advice that only university counts.

Keep in mind there is a very strong employment emphasis amongst young people in the country. Jobs mean a big thing — you have to have work. You need work for income, for mobility, for choice. Those kids have got to have jobs. Most of them have jobs during school. They are not going to walk away from that.

They frequently use the strategy of one year out — one year and a half out, maybe — to qualify for the independent living away from home youth allowance. But that may end up in their never going to university at all. Given their financial circumstances, why do they have to be subjected to that kind of test? They are not well-off in the first place.

That is a bit rambling, but they are basically the key issues to be dealt with when we talk about city versus country. There are also geographical differences within Melbourne that are very important. The school system is very highly stratified in Melbourne. The effects of residential segregation are very severe. In the north-west of Melbourne and in the south-east, underachievement is very high. That eliminates students in droves from any connection whatever with university.

If we were looking at strategies to boost participation in higher education, the fundamental thing in the city of Melbourne is to improve levels of achievement amongst young people from poorly educated backgrounds. Failure to boost achievement levels means that these young people are permanently excluded from higher education — not all of them, but many of them. We can discuss why there is underachievement and what to do about it, but that is

quite a large debate. Until that is dealt with properly, do not expect participation rates in higher education to rise dramatically in low-status areas of Melbourne. They will not, because the kids will not get to the gate in the first place. That is extremely important to emphasise.

Kids from lower socioeconomic status backgrounds in Melbourne suffer from many of the penalties that country kids do. They have not got any money, their parents do not have a lot of know-how about how to use the education system. The goodwill might be there — and it is especially true of migrant parents; strong goodwill — but lack of connections, lack of know-how, is an issue for them. It is not that the parents do not work or are not interested — they are. But if their kids go off the rails, it is more difficult for them to put them back on.

Often our schools in Melbourne in working-class suburbs are small and inefficient. They are underresourced, their programs are narrow and it is a huge job trying to build up the mix of pupils that is necessary to raise aspirations and support higher achievement. Some of the best brains in those schools in the north-west and in the south-east are poached, drained off into selective schools — by no means just private schools but other schools as well — so the focus weakens and aspirations fall. Conservation of teaching capital and teaching expertise and building up resources in larger, more comprehensive institutions is essential in the public high school system. That is absolutely essential from a pedagogical point of view, from a cultural point of view. There is no point having tiny schools in Melbourne offering classes in chemistry of three students. That is not a way to build aspirations and to get greater effort from kids.

Our curriculum has not been reviewed from the point of view of the economic incentives it contains to greater achievement. It is still largely an old-fashioned curriculum built around liberal values in a world that is dominated by markets. The incentives for kids to work harder in school are dull. We cannot get more effort from them. They are not dumb, but they do not see why they should work at school at all.

In our recent survey work in schools involving interviews with a lot of teachers, we wanted to know why the failure rates in Further Mathematics were so high — around 70 per cent to 78 per cent in some schools. Further Mathematics is known in the trade as 'vegie maths'; how can you fail a subject like that? It has been made harder partly because it has been colonised by strong students who can maximise their marks by doing that on top of all the other maths that are available to them. But the teachers say, 'Where are our kids?'. They are working long hours. They come to school and they are sleepy from the shift work, the long hours they put in. They cannot stay awake. It is not a lack of work ethic on the part of the kids; they are keen to work. But where is the ethic in relation to schoolwork? They do not see the meaning, they do not see the purpose. They are not going to do it even if they could. The curriculum is structured in such a way that there are not clear economic incentives to work. Teachers cannot ask things of kids who do not see purpose in their work. It is no longer the old days where a handful of kids offer the promise of educational progression and will do their best whatever the circumstances. It is a much more cloudy, complicated world.

The issues in Melbourne are, if we look at, say, the aspiration rates in the north-west of Melbourne, much lower and they are much more frequently a TAFE aspiration than a higher education aspiration, because the teachers know that these kids are going to get done if they put their hand up for university. So they are told, 'You better include a TAFE option' you are not going; universities don't want you'. Many of those kids, when they do get the TAFE offer — because they have been rejected by university — will reject the TAFE offer as well, as it is too good for them. They have this Groucho Marx attitude: if I could get an offer, it cannot be any good. They are very conservative.

There is a whole set of issues around country Victoria which we have to deal with, and we should not roll it all into one. We need a good geographically-sensitive view. East Gippsland is not the Mallee et cetera, or the south-west of Victoria. I would say the economic and the financial factors and the access to decent choice are overriding factors on the part of country kids, given their financial situation, which is often parlous.

In the city, underachievement is a huge issue. It is not just a question of, 'I need a job', though that equally is important. The kids have already made the decision they are going to get a job, and they have got a job, and they are not going to give much attention to schoolwork. Their understanding of higher education is very poor. There are kids in our schools at the moment in the city who seriously believe that they can be doctors. I am not saying they should not have hopes, but they seriously believe they are competitive, and they are not. They are not even going to get into a low-grade business course anywhere, but they maintain this belief that they are going places. It is unfortunate and it is wrong, because it distracts them from what they can do and what is available to them.

We have major problems of underachievement. Until those problems of underachievement are dealt with, aspirations for university will continue to be low. Some universities, including the one whose council I sit on— and I should just mention that — are very committed to their local communities and have a proactive, forward approach of going to schools to try to boost aspirations and to contribute to a process of improving achievement standards. Victoria University is a case in point. I think that is extremely important.

We have three cross-sector, multi-sector institutions in Victoria that offer TAFE programs as well as higher education, and that is an important issue. Okay, the kids cannot cope with university, but there is still a place for them. Maybe if they shine in that TAFE course they will go forward. That is good, although there are still issues of culture within the institutions that inhibit the extent of traffic between the sectors.

The letter inviting me to comment on your terms of reference asked me to look at these effective and innovative practices. Let me know if I am at that stage yet, or are you already sick of what I have said. I am happy to stop.

The CHAIR — I am sure a number of us want to hear your suggestions in that regard.

Prof. TEESE — Okay. As you have judged from my comments so far, the regeneration of the public school system, especially in poorer communities and in the country, is fundamental. That is the only way in which we can raise the achievement profile of our kids from the poorest families, and it is the only way we can build up incentives. A major regeneration of the public school system is fundamental.

The constraints on country regions but also on poorer suburbs in delivering a good range of programs are very high, so we have got a long way to go. I know that because over the last four years I have met every principal of a government school, primary or secondary, in this state. I have been right around the state twice, I have met them all and I listen to them. They are terrific, but the barriers they face in poorer suburbs and in poorer country communities are huge. That said, there is a big agenda item: how to get the public school system functioning everywhere — and not just in the leafy east; everywhere — has got to be the first item of policy. A good higher education system must sit on a strong school system, otherwise it is going to be wobbly. Just as a good TAFE system should sit on high levels of achievement amongst school students, so does a public school system.

We need to use our TAFE institutes to engineer higher levels of participation in higher education. TAFE is not there just as a feeder to university; we need to encourage a much fuller use of our TAFE system. They are closer to kids and are more accessible on the whole, but our children in our schools do not understand TAFE very well — for example, they say class sizes are as big in TAFE as in university. Where did they get that idea from? I teach students in units of 500 at a time. That does not happen anywhere in the TAFE sector. I have spent an entire year in a TAFE institute every Monday night and I never saw a class of more than about 20, so where did our school students get the idea that the classes are as big.

"You get more individual attention at university than at TAFE." Garbage! We do our very best to keep students from the door. If they are embarrassing, they are difficult or demanding, we do not want to know about it. "It takes as long to complete a TAFE course as a university course." Garbage! Degree courses are three to four, or five years long. Diploma courses are two years long, so the kids are full of that idea.

We need to build up the public school system so that it works well everywhere, and build up an understanding of TAFE so that it operates not only as a source of middle level and professional training — which it should — but as a bridge to higher education, which gives kids a few years to rebuild their confidence as learners; to have a program that is linked to enterprise and work, which is what they want; to restore their self-esteem as learners; and to open the door to higher education in a rational rather than forced manner, if they want it.

Reward the universities who are prepared to work with poor or low-achieving students. At the moment the federal funding model assumes that every university enrols an average student, but they do not. My university, which would have very few students coming in around the 50–60 percentile, does not really know about the great ocean of students out in the western suburbs and has got a totally different profile to Victoria University, but is funded on exactly the same basis.

How consistent is that with the federal funding model for non-government schools, which says, 'If you are poorer you get more money'? Our regional universities, Ballarat and VU are very poor, but they get exactly the same support financially as Melbourne University, Monash or for that matter RMIT. The funding model is crook, and there are penalties for the universities who choose to work with the poor. The penalties are that they are exposed to

greater attrition rates, to a weaker reputation. Their resources must be more focused on teaching than research, yet research is the thing that universities are graded on. The institutional disincentives and penalties for working with poorer communities are strong, and we encourage that by the bland, one-size-fits-all formula for funding Australian universities.

I think that we have not had enough discussion in this state about how our universities work. I think we have taken the view that it is a federal matter because almost all of the money is coming through federal taxation, but in fact how well our universities work and for whom should be a big item of discussion in this state, irrespective of who is paying. Ultimately we are paying; it is just a different channel.

That is about all in this very rough presentation, but I am happy to answer more specific questions.

The CHAIR — You certainly have covered some very interesting material and made some provocative comments in regard to your views.

Mr HERBERT — I will take up that last point, Richard. Thank you very much for your presentation. It is always interesting hearing you. The university that you are with pulled out of undergraduate courses — Melbourne University, I understand — over a number of years. I think it is the only Victorian university that does not offer undergraduate places in regional Victoria; is that correct? Let us assume it is.

Prof. TEESE — It must be pretty close to correct now.

Mr HERBERT — Just going to your point on that funding model, I understand from what you were saying and from previous information that it is more expensive for a university to operate courses in country Victoria for a range of factors, and geographic isolation has a cost to it. Are you proposing it would make a difference if all universities, through their funding model, were expected to offer courses in rural Victoria, or if there was a different funding model for universities and the number of students they have in rural and regional Victoria?

Prof. TEESE — I think we should reward universities which are prepared to work in poorer, more inaccessible communities. I do not know that we want an expectation that says, 'Any university that is publicly funded should have a commitment to regions'. The reason is that there would be quite a few reluctant brides, and you would get constant grumbling and a lack of sincere effort if you held a gun at the institutions' heads and said, 'You will teach in the country'. I do not see that as the way to go. I prefer a more ruthless approach, which is, 'I know you do not want to teach there and you do not have to, but you are getting less money'. That is straightforward. Then the institution makes its choice and no government is pushing the university around. That would be my view. If a university is prepared to open a campus in the Mallee or in far East Gippsland, then they should be rewarded for making the effort, or at least compensated for the additional relative cost of doing it, but there is no point in telling my university, 'You will go and teach in Shepparton'. They do. We have got a medical course up in Shepparton.

It is not that there is not an interest in doing it, but the weight of attention is elsewhere in a university that wants to be up there in the top 100, and personally I cannot see that pushing people around is the way to go, and saying, 'You go back and open the campus you had in Mildura in the 40s'. We are not going to do it.

Mr HERBERT — I am not proposing that. I would not call it pushing around; I would call it buying the services you want, and I think there is a very strong distinction in that. In the commonwealth funding models with universities there are negotiations around a whole range of factors in terms of the ultimate amount of money the university gets from the commonwealth. I would have thought that rurality would be one part of that.

Prof. TEESE — It should be one part of it. What I am getting at is the incentive should be the price, not a regulation that requires delivery. I would prefer to work on the basis then that there is a price there, we will go for it on economic grounds, but we are not being regulated. Regulation does not bring about the right spirit. That is all I am saying — not that it should not be taken into account. I run a self-funded research unit in the University of Melbourne. I am very happy if I do not ever hear from the senior academic officers. I pay my bills, they are happy to take their cut, and I will work with the prices that are out there for delivery of research services. That to me works well. If I am not prepared to work to the price, I do not get any work. Universities can take a choice. If they want to bid, let them bid. If they do not want to bid for regional delivery, they pay a price, but they can make up for

it elsewhere. They can make up for it because they have got international fee-paying students and so on, so they can do that.

Mr HERBERT — Can I just follow up very quickly on that? You would propose that the commonwealth regularly increase the number of HECS-funded places et cetera? I guess from what you are saying in terms of cost, they could simply say, 'We are prepared to fund an extra 500 rural places at X cost', and then let universities bid for it.

Prof. TEESE — Yes. Why not? You do not want a reluctant provider who is going to say, 'Yes, okay, we will bid for it', and we could have another 500 teacher training places for boys. I would not be in that. I just think put it out there but assess it in a quality sense and make demands about the range of places. It is not going to be 500 easy places. We want things like engineering, applied science, we want upmarket business courses . We want things that are gripping to the kids in the area — not what the university can put up because it has staff that are surplus to needs in department X or department Y. That should not be the gain. Equally I think, though, if the university is prepared to work hard with low achievers, it should get rewarded, because that is where the value-add really comes in.

Mr HALL — Thanks for your presentation. There are some interesting points I wanted to raise with you. The first is that I wanted to say I agree with your comments about the influence of aspiration on participation levels and a whole range of other issues associated with participation in tertiary education. I am also aware that part of those aspirational levels are influenced by the people that you go to school with. If you have got good kids in your classroom, they lift the level of aspiration of everybody in the classroom. I sort of question, therefore, the impact that maybe selective schools, both public and private, may have on the government school system and whether that has had a significant impact on the aspirations of students attending government schools. My gut feeling says it probably has. Is there any comparative data between government schools, between city and country, or between city regions or country regions that might help our committee look at those differences?

Prof. TEESE — When we say comparative data, do you mean on aspirations?

Mr HALL — Participation rates, deferral rates, percentage of students who apply for higher education?

Prof. TEESE — We can look at the aspiration rates of every school in the state separately. We can do that over a number of years. We can also look at the balance of their aspirations, if they survive to year 12, as between TAFE and higher education. We can do that. That could be done, and the Victorian government initiated that whole process in which they can actually look at the destinations and the aspirations of young people in every school, either state government or non-government. That can be done. That is not a problem.

But you raise an issue of great importance when we start to talk about selective schooling because, as you rightly say, aspirations sit in a culture and if the culture is one of demoralised indifference, do not expect to get much work from the kids, and certainly they are not going to go to university. If you lay across our government school system — and I do not mind being as controversial as you like — a pattern of selectivity on top of an existing pattern of selectivity through non-government schooling, then you are going to split the cohort still further, and you are going to remove what the French call the pilot students from every class. You are going to weaken pupil mix and you are going to depress aspirations, so I do not agree with the policy, and I do not care who hears it, of multiplying the number of selective schools. I think that that is ultimately destructive of the culture of schools.

I do not like segregated schools of the type we have had in the past where it becomes a point of honour to be thick. I do not believe in that. I believe that people should be exposed to academic demand in their schools, to high cognitive demands, to serious subjects, but they should have economic incentives for doing it, and selectivity is draining high-performing students out into little nurseries and depriving schools of cultural resources that are their only bulwark against a loss or lack of financial resources, so I am very uncomfortable with this policy.

The CHAIR — Can I ask you, Richard, in regard to what you were saying about regional schools or rural schools — that you think the information provided to students that develops their aspirations might be lacking — how can that be best addressed, do you believe?

Prof. TEESE — I would not be relying on the careers guidance officers in schools to do that because they do not necessarily have the depth of experience. There are two areas in which their experience is limited — in apprenticeship and in TAFE VET — so it needs a much fuller effort on the part of industry and TAFE institutes to

communicate with schools in a practical manner. I have been out to numerous TAFE institutes to thump the table about this and complain about the style of communication. They always fail to talk about what it is like to learn at TAFE, so kids who are struggling do not see the pedagogical incentive of going to a TAFE, and yet if you went to Holmesglen, for example, and you looked at the library or the computer centre, that was designed by students.

The TAFEs have got to market themselves into schools. They have got to actually go to schools with a roadshow, and they have got to have a broad marketing pitch. It is a question of marketing. Unfortunately, it is all about markets, and you cannot pretend that it is not. There are vigorous TAFE institutes in this state. Box Hill is an example — Holmesglen, Kangan, brilliant TAFEs. Go into the schools and explain what you are doing. Build up a relationship with schools as Kangan has done, for example. I think that is the way to do it. Everything is stacked against the TAFEs from a prestige point of view, so the way to deal with that is not by regulation but by communication and by getting out there, and they are not doing it enough because kids have got bad ideas, false ideas about what is available.

Mr HALL — Does the delivery of some of those VET subjects provide the opportunity for the country TAFE institutes to actually bring the kids to the TAFE college? In East Gippsland, which you were talking about before, you have got Swifts Creek, Orbost and, I think, Mallacoota, but certainly Lakes Entrance, and all the kids that are coming into the TAFE institute a day a week, to do some of those VET courses.

Prof TEESE — This is great. In the long run we would want more VET in schools to be delivered on site rather than exported out, but in country districts that is difficult because the schools are very small. They do not have the economies of size to enable them to have workshops, to have business centres and so on.

I think that is great, I really do think that is great, but on the other hand it is costly. There are TAFE institutes that are screwing the schools. That is not on; that has got to be stopped. There are parents in Broadmeadows and in the north of Melbourne that are asked to pay $1500. They do not have $1500, and they are never going to have it. The only chance for their kids is to get access to those courses, and the fee is $1500. A few TAFE institutes need a talking to about their pricing policies, but I think the government will do something about that this year.

Mr DIXON — Just one question. You said there are very high knock-back rates of university places in regional Victoria — in other words, the universities are knocking back students who have applied and they have not got in. I just want to clarify that point. The main reason for that is that they have applied for the wrong courses in the first place, is that what you are saying? They have over-aspired themselves?

Prof TEESE — It is certainly going to include that, but whether that is all there is, is another issue. All we have to think about is, if I apply for what is available, and if what is available is fairly narrow and is actually just a bit beyond what I have got on board, I am going to get the knock-back. Now it is also true that there are kids who get knocked back in the city, and some of these kids are very bright, but they mismanage their choices, so it is medicine, medicine, medicine — then they are out. But that is bad counselling on the part of schools.

It struck me as being especially bad in the country, that the rates of non-offer can reach such high levels. That requires a careful analysis of the courses they put their hands up for because the kids are not dumb.

Mr DIXON — Yes, that is right, that is the connection I am trying to work out.

Prof TEESE — And how do you square it? I just ran a couple of jobs this last week and I have done the analysis, but obviously it needs a bit of work. How confident can I be? I have broken everything out, looked at it, but I do want to stress that it is provisional. I could be wrong and I do not want to send people up the wrong track, finding a problem that actually does not exist.

On my analysis, which is direct from the VTAC files — which are not selective, they are the whole population, the whole census — that is the story that comes through. I have got them down here: the no-offer is up to 20 per cent in country regions. That is every fifth applicant for a higher education place is told to nick off. It never gets that high in the city.

The range of courses is much greater in the city — the opportunities, the number of institutions, including some private ones — it is much greater. Kids in the country do not have that luxury, so to me they are more vulnerable. And that is after you take account of high dropout rates and the economic side of it. So they are willing to take the

debt and they are willing to build the university attendance into their part-time numbers et cetera Something is going on. There are a few things that need to be investigated.

The rejection rate is also something that needs to be inspected carefully. Why do country kids so often reject places in higher education? What is that due to? Is that snobbishness? Is that because they are now confronted with the bill? When you get a higher education bill what you are looking at is $6000 — that is what it comes to. You do not have to pay the whole six grand straightaway, but that is what comes in the mail. Six grand, have you got it? All right, you can pay it or you can defer it, but there is fear when you get a bill like that. And it is six grand next year, and it is growing. There is fear connected with that from parents whose income is irregular or very limited, so it is difficult.

There is rejection and then discontinuation. Why is the dropout rate higher? And you cannot put it down to the kids being dumb. The retention rate is much lower, and only the more academic kids on the whole survive. They are reluctant to put their hands up in the first place, so the determination to work must be greater if they go in, but why do they drop out in greater numbers? There are a whole series of issues of an empirical kind that have to be investigated.

And then there is a whole series of issues around Melbourne, which is the biggest population centre with the most diversity and where there are a lot of problems, as we have discussed.

Mr HALL — In terms of some of the economic issues you spoke about, Richard, you presented us with a number of things that need to be done, you did not mention access to a youth allowance or a similar supporting income for a student. So if you come from one of those deprived socioeconomic areas, whether it be in Melbourne or whether it be from the country where you incur considerable expenses perhaps to travel and study, how important is easy access to a youth allowance?

Prof TEESE — I would say, given the reports by students themselves, especially in the country, that the economic factors are of overriding importance. These kids are motivated, willing to work, but they feel very restricted by those barriers. So the economic barrier which is, 'How do I earn my living', has got to be dealt with expeditiously. It should not be a question of saying, 'Are you really serious about going to university? If you are, go and work for a year or a year and a half.' I do not agree with that and in the past we have not had to do that.

I was a scholarship student, an older-aged scholarship student. I got a living away from home allowance because I was an older person, I had been in the workforce for many years, but I qualified straight away because of my age. These kids should qualify straight away. At the moment there are kids who are forced to work for a year with all the distracting effects that that involves, while there are kids who eventually get it who have not done anything and who should not get it anyway because their father is a dentist, and so on, and people talk about it quite openly, that it is inequitable.

What does the delay do? What public function does it serve to say, 'You are not having it until you have proved your independence'? They are not independent anyway, so what does it do? I am not convinced about that, I do not see that. The question is how do those kids support themselves when their parents are struggling to do it in the first place? I do not see any useful purpose with this youth allowance requirement . What it does is it cools them out and many of them do not take up their places. It does not solve any economic problem at all, so I am not convinced about that one.

The CHAIR — Could I just ask: are you aware of any work being done to find out how many students who defer then ultimately do not take up the place, and so just drop out of the system, and what percentage do take it up?

Prof TEESE — Yes, we have done that on a longitudinal study. Most kids do take up the place that they defer, but there is a regional bias in it as well. I have not got the exact figure with me. It is the one thing on my yellow stickers I do not have, because I looked at the dropout rate. But I remember doing an analysis myself on deferment, and saying, 'Well, I hope they come back into it' and they do, but I think it is 20 per cent who do not, and I think it is higher in the country.

I am not saying the so-called gap years are not important in young people's orientation towards higher learning and so on, but I think they should have the choice. They should not be forced to defer. I do not like this business of pushing people around. They should be able to go into study, and the universities for their part have got to make it

easier so that kids can work and study at the same time, instead of timetabling lectures during the day and only during the day. The kids are working, and their working over 15 hours a week is associated with an increasing tendency to drop out.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Richard. You have provided us with a lot to think about. We look forward to any further information you are able to provide to the committee too.

Prof. TEESE — If anyone wants to follow up with specific questions, I am happy for them to contact me through work via email; it is easy to find my email address. I am sorry I have not been able to give you a written submission — I am just flat out at work. Thank you very much.

Witness withdrew.

C O R R E C T E D V E R S I O N

EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into geographical differences in the rate in which Victorian students participate in higher education

Melbourne — 25 February 2008

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Witnesses

Mr G. Allen, chair, and

Mr P. Brown, executive officer, Country Education Project.

The CHAIR — I welcome the representatives from the Victorian Country Education Project, Gary Allen and Phil Brown. I presume you understand what the inquiry is about, that it is looking at geographical variation as it applies to tertiary acceptances and so on. Obviously the information you share will be very valuable to us.

I just need to let you know that evidence taken by the committee, including submissions, is subject to parliamentary privilege and is granted immunity from judicial review pursuant to the Constitution Act and the Parliamentary Committees Act. I am also advised that I should let you know that it is an offence to give false evidence to a parliamentary committee, but I am sure that is not going to be the case. We would be pleased to hear from you initially and then to have the opportunity to ask you some follow-up questions.

Mr ALLEN — Thank you, all members, for the invitation to address the committee, and thanks for the graveyard shift! We will try to make it as interesting as we can.

Perhaps I can start with a little bit about us and the organisation. I am Gary Allen and I chair the Country Education Project Victoria. Phil Brown is the executive officer of the project. The CEP originated out of the Country Areas Program, which was funded by the commonwealth government in the 70s, and until the reforms in 1993 the funding developed a statewide structure with areas around the rural communities. It was initially divided into five main areas and each area had a structure. It was a statewide organisation that was part of the bureaucracy that tried to address the disadvantage of distance. It tried to empower rural communities to make decisions and develop programs that they saw as meeting their needs and addressing their disadvantage.

Under the current reforms that money then went straight to schools through the global budgets. At that time I was principal of the Lorne P-12 school, and I was part of one of those clusters — it was called the Otways cluster. We used to go to meetings and divide up money according to programs and submissions. Then I got a grant of $10 000 in my program budget to develop as I wished. I was accountable ultimately to the commonwealth government for the distribution of those moneys. Those of us who wanted to see CEP stay decided to incorporate. We formed a body and we kept the project going as an incorporated body. It is independent of government, but we still rely on the state government for part of our funding for the service agreement. We rely on Catholic education, and we rely on school communities who receive money through CAP to join. We have 400 school communities that are members of the organisation. I am a voluntary chairperson; I am retired. Phil is a full-time paid officer of the project.

One of the things we did in about 2000 was to commission a study into rural students' access to university places and so on. It was termed Three Times Less Likely. We believed that rural students were three times less likely to progress onto university. We also commissioned an Austudy research program, and we will include those programs in our final report that we will be submitting to the committee at the end of March.

We have not followed on with the Three Times Less Likely. Because of our limited resources, we tend to go on and look at other projects and other research and provide information relevant to our constituents, but anecdotally we feel that there has been a decrease in the number of students taking up university places from our rural communities. Of our 400 school communities, 55 provide the VCE. There has been a decrease in university placement but an increase in TAFE employment and apprenticeships. We are a little bit sceptical of the On Track data as it relates to our specific constituents. Often it is difficult to get consistent data from our little schools, because you will not get a consistent cohort, and the students do not necessarily reply and send back the data, so the information often is not consistent.

We also anecdotally believe that a large number of students who go to TAFE employment or apprenticeships may later go on to further education through universities, and that data does not tell us that. What we would like to do is to commission a longitudinal study to look further into what we believe the On Track data perhaps disguises. It may underestimate the involvement.

If I could just relate that I was principal of the Lorne P-12 school for a number of years, and then I became principal at Ararat Secondary College before I retired in 2001 and took up this position at CEP. From a principal's perspective in the rural areas, Lorne was different. We had what we called the coastal malaise. We often got frustrated that the kids were not being aspirational and did not want to go on to university, and we were trying to do things to encourage them to do so. But at certain times we had to stand back and question our values. Was it right that we should be putting that value on these students when they were perfectly happy and contented with the path that they were going in.

Ararat was an interesting place. I suppose Ararat at that stage was still going through a declining population enrolment. The students coming from farms, the rural section, had reasonably high values and aspirations, but they were not necessarily to go to university. It may have been to go back to the farm; it may have been to go to a provincial centre for TAFE or apprenticeships, but they were certainly terrific kids who had aspirations and quite set values. Of the town students in Ararat, I would say that the ones more likely to go to university were the students who were from professional backgrounds.

That became more of a problem in the state schools as more of those students went into private education, either within Ararat or to Ballarat or Melbourne, which I think is a statewide trend. Of that professional group, there was a very high probability that those students would go on to university, and usually where their parents trained if they could; that was their aspiration. They had high aspirations. Amongst the townspeople who did not come from a professional background we found that there were very low aspirations and very low valuing of education intrinsically. That was the group that really had low representation in terms of going on to university and higher education.

We have put before you, and Phil has distributed, some recommendations and some points that we want to discuss. That is a little about my background. I will now hand over to Phil, who is our executive officer.

Mr BROWN — I guess where we are at in terms of presenting some material to this committee is that we have consulted. We are in the process of consulting with a number of our rural communities in terms of their feedback in relation to higher education participation issues and all of those sorts of things. Today's paper is just to present you with an opportunity to see if some of those issues come out, but we will formalise this in a written report to which we will attach some of the research we have done over the last 10 or 15 years.

There are some common issues that are coming through in those conversations. One of the things that we need to think about is what Gary highlighted. In the changing world in which young people find themselves, the actual tracking of kids in a lineal process from school into the next phase of their education does not necessarily occur in that lineal approach any more. Kids tend to vary their pathways from here to there to wherever. We are currently working on figures that show that about 25 per cent of our year 12 graduates are actually deferring further study of any form whatsoever — that might be a vocational study; it might be a university study — and looking at a whole range of other options. What we are now finding is that is not necessarily a bad thing, especially for rural and remote communities and young people.

As Gary said, there needs to be some work undertaken to look a bit further out in terms of what happens to these young people and whether they actually participate in higher education. The current data that we track is predominantly within three to five years after they finish. What we are finding from anecdotal information makes us keen to do some research that goes out 10 or 15 years. There was a very small project that I was involved in up around Wodonga where they actually tracked kids for 10 years after they left school, whatever their year level. We found data and information in that that was quite staggering compared to what they were being told, in that kids would actually go and pick up work for three or four years, experience the world, and then all of a sudden think they need to go back and do further education. At the age of 23 or 24 they were starting to go back into the higher education sector.

I think we need to do some work, especially in rural and remote areas, on the sorts of pathways that kids now take. We need to explore those over a longer term. As Gary said in relation to the On Track data from the majority of our schools, firstly, it might be that the kids do not respond to that data, hence the rural and remote data from On Track is skewed; secondly, statistically viable data through On Track in a school that has only got two or three kids doing year 12 cannot be taken within the larger On Track data. There needs to be some work done on the data collection.

The other one is a perception thing — that is, the perception that higher education or university is the logical next step or the best next step for kids to take in their career path. The feedback we are getting from communities is that perhaps that perception needs to be challenged, and perhaps there is a whole range of different ways in which we can actually get to the educational level that those kids want to aspire to. That is another area.

The other area is the deferment level, and that seems to have increased in the last two to three years. There are a whole range of factors that impact on that. One is the impact of the drought, especially in the western part of this state. If you look at the On Track data from some of those schools, the university participation has decreased

significantly. The uptake of deferments has been there to generate income to become independent and hence help the family out in terms of when they choose to go to university.

But I think there is another element that we do not actually consider very often, and that is the skills shortage and the job availability that exists within a lot of our rural and regional centres for young people. A lot of those young people are actually using the opportunities that that provides them with to jump into there and start moving their career path along those lines, and actually seeing employment as their first step in terms of getting their career.

There was a job advertised in one of our local papers for a trainee surveyor that was expected to do a certificate 2. They could not fill it for 12 months, but now that position is a fully integrated study what you like as we look after you type of position. 'You can do the certificate 2 or certificate 3 program with us, but then we will support you to go and do your degree program if that is what you want to do'. There are those sorts of things that are starting to happen out there because of the skills shortage that young people are actually utilising for their own benefit. Some of them are well paid too, I might add.

I think the other point that Gary made was that aspirational thing. A number of our rural and remote communities do not actually see higher education as a high priority for their kids, but it might be that they are just going to integrate into the family life and into the farming life, or whatever the family actually has, and move on through that process and become a manager or an owner or whatever in those sorts of contexts.

An area that came up often in our consultations was that in fact in rural communities young people do not have role models to look at that are focused with a higher educational outcome. If you go to a place such as Hopetoun, or those sorts of more remote places, the professional people they have contact with that have higher education qualifications are generally teachers or health workers. Their exposure to people who actually work in professions that have a higher education qualification attached to them are fairly limited.

What we have seen in the last few years is that while 10 or 15 years ago universities would develop partnerships with rural and remote schools and actually send people out to share the potential that those universities had for those young people, that does not happen any more. What you are seeing is that young people have a perception that the professionals in their local communities are teachers and health workers, and the other trend is that the apprenticeships and traineeships start kicking in because they also see that at a local level.

Mr ALLEN — Could I just interrupt there and add to the role model, particularly with teaching? I think sadly, when I left teaching, teachers were not a good role model for students. They were not encouraging students to take up teaching as a career, which was different from when I was a student and was encouraged to do so. I think it is very sad and I think it is to do with the low morale often in the teaching profession that they just do not encourage people to take it up as a job, and that has implications for us in terms of rural placements too, once people graduate.

Mr BROWN — I guess the other interesting thing that is coming out often is the fact that we need to understand the kids transitional processes. I might be sitting in a Bendigo and my next exciting adventure is Melbourne, so that is where I enrol my university placements or my higher education placements. If I am sitting in Lakes Entrance or Mallacoota, my next adventure is Bairnsdale or Traralgon, and then we progress. It is very interesting when you actually look at the university enrolments and where kids actually end up. Kids in Werrimul and Hopetoun tend to go to La Trobe in Bendigo because that is the next step of adventure in their life. Once they get to Bendigo they might make the next step into the Melbournes or the Sydneys or the Canberras, and it is a very significant process.

I was just talking to a principal this morning who had kids predominantly — over 50 per cent of his students going to universities — who are going to the Gippsland campus of Monash and he is at Maffra. Of the other 50 per cent, 20 per cent of those have gone to rural campuses in either Tasmania or New South Wales. That is starting to get reflected in some of what the schools are telling us in terms of there is this stepping process in the way that kids perceive getting their higher education.

Mr HALL — Is that cultural or is it economic, Phil? Do kids travel to a community where they feel more socially acceptable rather than going to Melbourne, or it is cheaper for Maffra kids to go to Churchill rather than go to Melbourne?

Mr ALLEN — I think it is both, but I think predominantly cultural.

Mr BROWN — It is also a bit about what I know, so if I am in Hopetoun and I go and do my Christmas shopping, I tend to go to Bendigo or Mildura. That is what I know. It is a bit of that comfort zone thing as well, whereas to come to Melbourne might be a bit scary.

Mr ALLEN — I was brought up in Lorne as a child and I know that I would have gone to Geelong rather than go to Melbourne University. I was homesick for the first six months of being at Melbourne University. I would have gone to Geelong if the option had of been there at the time.

Mr BROWN — Those young people who generally take up higher education in Melbourne have got the infrastructure to support them to do that, either through families or people they know or networks that they have developed. I think that is where the non-government sector has something over the government sector, in that the networks are much stronger for those young people. What we are hearing from schools and communities is the fact that those people who actually go to Melbourne for their university generally have a family contact or an infrastructure support existing in Melbourne that they can actually tap into and utilise.

While there are some ad hoc support programs for rural and remote communities, they are not known. As an organisation we come into contact with some organisations, private and public, who offer support mechanisms for rural and remote kids moving to metro Melbourne. They are few and the knowledge base of what they offer and what they are does not get out to the young people in rural and remote communities. We are aware of a business person in Fitzroy who actually just leases houses predominately for rural and remote kids coming to study in Melbourne, but most kids in this state would not be aware that that exists.

I think an area that we could explore into the future for rural and remote kids is that notion of transition and supporting that transition at all levels. There are increased costs associated with that, and I am not just talking financial or economic here. When you actually talk to a 17 or 18-year-old young person, the community links they have built up over that time — the netball club, the football club — is their security. For the first year of their transition out of that community they will spend most weekends going back there, playing those sports, staying attached to those networks because it is safe for them. It provides that break for them in terms of that big, wide world out there.

A final point I would make is that the drought, especially in the western part of the state, has had an impact on young people taking up further study and that is purely an economical issue, but it is also an issue of the family saying, 'If you stay home there is another worker that we have that we do not have to pay cash for through the family business'. We have noticed that in the last two or three years that that has had a significant impact on young people deferring especially but also taking up higher ed.

In finishing we will throw some challenges on the table, as we always do. I guess we think about the higher education system as being very much driven by a commonwealth agenda and those sorts of things. What can we at a state level start thinking about to help these young people? There are two things I think we can really practically start thinking about.

One is exploring a brokerage model, or a concept around supporting the transition from rural and remote into that higher education sector, socially, relationally and economically. I think that is something we can work at at a state level in terms of setting up a mechanism which provides the links and explores the potential — for example, we have talked about the concept of us working with the YMCA to provide cheap accommodation for rural and remote, to bring a whole range of rural and remote kids together, but the resources just are not there for that to facilitate and establish itself to get going. I think that is a really important area that we can explore and that could then spin off in a whole range of other ways whereby information can flow back the other way, back to schools so that schools can get access to that broader knowledge base that young people do not necessarily get in rural communities because of role models, lack of information getting to them and all those sorts of issues.

The second area is just a simple thing like giving them V/Line tickets every second month so they can go home and stay connected with their communities; and exploring that as a possibility to support young people, especially when you talk about metropolitan-based higher education students. They do not have to worry about the cost of actually getting home and back again, but it helps them to stay connected with their community and make that transition over a period of 12 to 18 months. They are a couple of little things to finish on, Geoff.

Mr DIXON — Just anecdotally, my first impression when we came into this inquiry was that the biggest barrier for country students furthering their education is the financial one in terms of cost of accommodation and

just living away from home. What weight would you put on that in percentage terms, do you think? Is that the major reason, or is it still a mix, or does it depend on which area of the state they are from?

Mr BROWN — My gut reaction is that it is fairly significant if you are just talking about moving from my school at Murtoa into Melbourne University. It is a significant issue, but there are a whole range of other things around that, Martin — my perception of it and all those sorts of other things — but it is a significant issue that I need to address. What you will find is that often if families really want their kid to go to university and the kid wants to go to university, you will end up with double incomes or something being sacrificed for that to happen.

Mr ALLEN — My instinct is that that is the case for professional people. I think they will do anything that they can to overcome that problem. Where it is more of a problem, I think, is those students who want to go from a non-professional, non-aspirational background. I think they are the ones that are really adversely affected. But I think if the history is there and the tradition is there, the family will do almost anything to make it happen, so I do not think it is quite the barrier for them that it is for the people with non-professional backgrounds.

The CHAIR — What about accommodation? I grew up in Geelong and went to Melbourne, and university colleges were a great way of getting into university. I suspect that cost is something that puts people off. I know there were other hostels and things, but for training teachers they do not seem to be an option any more. Are there other options available that perhaps students do not know about for some kind of supported accommodation in Melbourne that they could make use of?

Mr ALLEN — It is this example that Phil referred to. There are quite a lot of entrepreneurs who are providing housing that does have limited support. They are around, but there is no mechanism that people generally know about it. That is what we were saying. Perhaps there could be some sort of network that we could sponsor to try to build that communication between the students of our communities. Those sorts of commercial deals are springing up and are more prevalent.

The CHAIR — I suspect that the bone is familiar, and it is the communication and knowledge and building it.

Mr BROWN — Geoff, a lot of churches offer that process, but they tend to be internal networks that get that information out. With the entrepreneurs that Gary is talking about, they have got to the point where they understand that it is more than just providing a roof over a kid's head. It is about that transition that takes a bit longer. The guy that we have met in terms of the Fitzroy concept, he offers barbecues every Sunday night that he expects all his housemates to come to. He does those sorts of social support mechanisms so that the transition into metro Melbourne for those kids is much easier.

Mr ALLEN — And it is generally the first year anyway. Quite often after the first year the students have formed their own friendship groups and go and move into a flat or a house. Really the problem is in that first year.

Mr HALL — In terms of some of the statistics relating to participation, deferral, achievement et cetera, are you aware of any differences between your CEP member schools as opposed to other regional or country schools? Is there a significant difference?

Mr ALLEN — Our difficulty is the On Track data that we get from our rural schools is so unrealisable. We suspect that there is a difference, but it is very difficult for us to plot over five years a trend, because one school may be reliable in its data one year but not the next, so we would struggle at this time to give you specific statistics.

Mr BROWN — But generally, Peter, the notion of lower-higher education participation is certainly the case in rural and remote. Higher participation in apprenticeships and trades and vocations is higher in the rural and remote communities as opposed to their regional counterparts.

Mr HALL — Is that just due to opportunity do you think, Phil?

Mr BROWN — I think it has got to do with perception, and I think it has got to do with opportunities, yes.

Mr HALL — Is it easier to access the local TAFE institute than the — —

Mr BROWN — There is also that adventure step process as well. Bairnsdale has got the TAFE provider, so they will go there: 'They have not got a university, so I will make that step first, then I will go the next step'.

Mr HALL — So they have got a university. In respect to the first year of some RMIT programs, do you find that if your schools are members of CEP that that is a significant advantage? Does that help kids if they can go to their local TAFE institute to access a first-year university program?

Mr BROWN — The information we have got is that most kids who actually live in rural or remote communities will choose a regional university base as opposed to a metro, unless there is that network existing in a Melbourne-based process.

Mr ALLEN — To try to answer your question more accurately, that is why we are quite keen to do a longitudinal study to try to get a more accurate handle on that.

Mr HALL — How do we get the role models back into the schools to improve that aspirational level? There have been many fine students who have gone and achieved things from Swifts Creek Secondary College, with major science degrees, or medical students who have gone from Charlton — is it? — or Donald, one of those schools because it is a high achiever in your network?

Mr BROWN — If you ring most of our schools you will find that most years they will have a student over 95. They will always have the one student who will go that next level — I think Swifts Creek had a 98.5 kid this year — and Ouyen and those sorts of places. Lorne, I think, got a 99 or something. From that perspective, they are there — the kids are there — and they can perform at that level. It does not seem to matter which school you are in in terms of your performance. The Swifts Creek kid is the one that I know and has a professional father who works in the local hospital and who actually makes an effort to expose that young person to a whole range of opportunities outside of Swifts Creek, so that works.

Mr ALLEN — And I know with the child from Lorne that the parents were teachers and both highly valued education. They came from a Hare Krishna background, where intrinsically they value education — a brilliant student; I know who the child is.

The other difficulty is, of course, that there are more transitory families coming into rural communities because of the economic availability of cheaper accommodation, and often they do not have a high aspirational value for going on to further ed. To me, again, it is the role model that teachers play that is so vital. If you have teachers who provide that inspiration and that encouragement, it is more likely to happen. I feel there is a little bit of a need for an injection of perhaps more enthusiasm, particularly in our rural schools where our teachers are ageing and have been there for a long time.

Mr BROWN — The other point I make here is that part of the concept we were talking about, the spin-off back the other way, that you actually allow young people to have a conversation about what the potential is out there. At the moment we expect young people from these communities to go to regional centres or to metro Melbourne to go to careers information days and all those sorts of things, which is basically information flow. What RMIT and La Trobe used to do was actually allow career-counselling processors to come to the school so the kids could get exposed to a whole range of opportunities, and that process does not exist any more. If you actually took a process of supporting the transition of young people into Melbourne and then reverse that, then the information flow could go back out to those young people and that conversation can start again.

Mr DIXON — Where do they get their information now that that is not happening?

Mr ALLEN — It varies. I know Barbara Green, who is the principal at St Hilda's at Melbourne University. She goes out to rural areas. She goes out and she talks to rural kids and rural schools and it is terrific. They have a waiting list, but at least she is proactive when she gets out there.

Mr DIXON — But other than that, they are just sitting there?

Mr BROWN — What do they get exposed to?

Mr DIXON — Yes.

Mr BROWN — There is a young person I know in my town, he is a very good sportsperson, so that is the profession he gets exposed to. So what is his selection with his VCE and then on to university? Sports scientist, physio — all those sorts of things. Now he has taken a gap year and is working with an engineer, and because he has been exposed to that he is starting to see the opportunities that that industry can provide him. Perhaps that is an opportunity for him to work in that area, and he could use his sport as an entertainment and social base. I think it comes back to Gary's point: if you have been networked, you are going to give your kids a better exposure to those sorts of opportunities.

Mr ALLEN — Careers teaching often varies, too. There is a lot of variation in the quality of careers teachers in schools.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Are you aware of any programs or initiatives interstate or overseas which tend to break down the barriers for country students?

Mr ALLEN — Finland, again! You are probably sick of hearing about Finland.

Mr KOTSIRAS — No, I am not.

Mr ALLEN — There are definite partnerships — is our understanding. Not having had the fortune to go there, from what I have been told there are definite partnerships between local government and business, and they nurture and they value and they encourage people from all around the country to access higher education. It is just a culture and a community thing — there is a whole network, because they value education as an intrinsic thing, and therefore they set the network up. So that would be one that would spring to mind.

Mr KOTSIRAS — There is nothing interstate? So no-one is doing anything?

Mr ALLEN — Not that we are aware of.

Mr DIXON — I am thinking about Western Australia, Queensland and places like that.

Mr BROWN — There are places like the Pilbara in Western Australia where the mining companies actually work with their local schools to develop a partnership, but how strongly that is focused on the young people getting a greater understanding of the potential in those industries I think it is too early to say yet. But certainly they are thinking of it: if we are going to actually make some money out of this community we perhaps had better invest some in it. So they are doing things like building schools or school facilities. But how much of that has gone back the other way of kids actually being exposed to site managers and those sorts of places, I am not sure.

Mr ALLEN — There is a very interesting town in Western Australia, and the name of it escapes me for the moment — —

Mr BROWN — Meredin.

Mr ALLEN — No, not Meredin — where the town provided training in nursing. It was 4 hours from Perth, and to attract young people into that training institution they provided a free bus back to Perth every weekend. So the kids knew that if they wanted to get back to Perth to party, they could. Apparently just a simple thing like that was quite successful, and that place was full. They had their nurses trained there — can you remember the name of it?

Mr BROWN — Not Lake Grace?

Mr ALLEN — Sorry. It is just before Lake Grace. Again, if communities are proactive in doing it, this is where we would like to see some networking. We have started what we call the rural educators network. We have received some funding from both the Catholic and the state system to set up a network of pre-service teachers. So we will link them socially and professionally with the hope that they might then be interested in a rural placement when they leave the university. A similar network that we could be interested in getting into is trying to link year 12 students to tertiary and higher ed in a similar way.

Mr HERBERT — Gary, on another issue in terms of impediments and aspirations, one of the things about small country secondary schools is that they cannot of course offer a large variety of subject choice for

students, and I wonder whether that has anything to do with the other factors that you were going through before in terms of impediments — i.e., if a student cannot have a wide choice, does that impact down the track on their university et cetera?

Mr ALLEN — There is a perception that that is the case. I would contend that that often is illusory. When I was the principal at Lorne we developed our timetable around student choices. So the student timetable grew out of what the students wanted to do. When I was teaching at Melbourne High and recently at Caulfield Grammar, the students were given the timetable; they then choose. Yes, we may not have access to a Chinese teacher or a French teacher or a physics teacher, and that may be a problem. But the timetabling issue and subject choice is not as often a problem as some people imagine it is

Mr HERBERT — The reason I ask is, with the vast increase in technology, with videoconferencing and various networking, whether that would have an impact if clusters of schools offered a much broader curriculum by putting videoconferencing in every secondary school in the country; that sort of thing, whether that is an issue.

Mr ALLEN — It is interesting, because when I was at Lorne we videoconferenced. We had a link between Lorne, Lavers Hill and Apollo Bay. We had, through CRA money, a videoconferencing linking, and we had common timetables between the three schools and we taught subjects by videoconferencing. The tragedy is that that no longer exists. It has not been in existence for six years.

The CHAIR — Why is that?

Mr ALLEN — People have become more insular in their thinking; principals have become more insular in their thinking. Networking collaborative approaches have become less in the vogue. The Leading Schools Fund initiative, for example, in the Mallee — were you aware that there is an initiative to create the virtual classroom?

Mr HERBERT — Yes.

Mr ALLEN — But I will predict that in three years time there will be whiteboards languishing in the Mallee, because we do not take the step of bringing our people along. We think by simply putting the technology there that it is going to happen, and it just does not always go that way. You have got to get the teachers skilled and the desire to make that link. I think necessity will be the mother of invention. I think to keep the schools open they will eventually embrace this technology, but it is taking time. Phil saw in Canada what is called blended learning in operation, and he was very impressed by that form of learning that is happening in Alberta. I do not know whether you want to say something about that.

Mr BROWN — There are two comments I would make — —

Mr HERBERT — Was that a trip about a year or two ago?

Mr BROWN — Yes.

Mr HERBERT — It sounds like a fantastic trip. There must have been an army of you.

Mr BROWN — It took me about six months to get over it — work-wise. There are two comments. Your comment about breadth and choice, Steve, is one that is floating around often, and it is one I ask rural and remote principals, but I ask it in a slightly different form. I ask: 'Are there any VCE students that have not been provided with a learning program that they requested?'. The 100 per cent response is no, because what rural schools will do is that they will actually sacrifice resources to actually make sure they can deliver it, so they will run a class with one kid in it, because it is important in their community that that happens. There are, however, some curriculum areas that I think some geographical locations in the state are struggling with. Physics is one and languages is another.

I think that notion of choice and breadth is the opportunity for those kids to move on. In rural communities schools do everything they can to cater for every kid, and I think that is a strength that we need to promote, and it has not been done. What they see in their regional counterparts is if they cannot find five kids in a classroom to fill a classroom, then it is distance ed for those five kids. So it is a totally different mindset. But I would think if you travelled around this state and interviewed those 55 schools, you would find that most schools would be offering what those kids sat down and said they wanted.

The area that I think we can further develop is that notion of ICT and utilisation of it — the full potential of it. We were delivering in rural schools back at the end of the 1980s and 1990s more VCE units through ICT than we are today, and I think that says something — for example, the Alpine cluster, which is Bright, Myrtleford, Marion and Beechworth, offered about eight VCE units through telematics at that time. There are none being offered by ICT in that same cluster today.

Mr ALLEN — The Otways cluster offered five, and there are none now.

Mr BROWN — So there are some issues there in terms of ICT. I will share my view on it. I think when we went to individual school-managed and funded processes what that did was that it stopped me meeting with Gary down the road and having an educational debate about what I cannot offer and what he cannot offer. So if the money was on the table there for six or seven schools, we had to work out how to use that money as a collegiate group rather than, 'I have got the money now; I will do what I can with it'. I think we need to rethink how we resource rural and remote schools to actually encourage that thinking back.

The final point I make is that along with that decreasing use is the decreasing skills base of our staff to use the potential that ICT provides. What I saw in Canada was kids using mobile phones and iPods and web-based materials. What I see here is whiteboards and those sorts of things. Let us move with the kids.

Mr ALLEN — Schools ban mobile phones in the classroom. You are not allowed to have your mobile phone on. It is ridiculous, because mobile phones now access the email.

Mr BROWN — So I think we have got to actually start learning, Steve, how to marry the culture of young people into the education culture, because I do not think we are anywhere near it.

Mr HALL — In terms of providing opportunity for country kids, does any Victorian university do it better than others? I suppose I am talking about scholarships or particular pastoral care programs that they offer to country students.

Mr BROWN — I am aware that Deakin University does some. They offer a Koori-specific project for Koori kids in Victoria. It is basically what we were saying to you before — it is a brokerage model that supports the transition of those young people into a university context, so they have a Koori unit within Deakin University that supports those kids.

Mr HALL — Melbourne, I think, has a limited program?

Mr BROWN — Yes, Melbourne has a minimal one. Charles Sturt University of Albury offers the incentive of the TER score, so if you come from a rural location you get an extra 5 on your TER.

Mr ALLEN — But if they go in and offer scholarships and bursaries to year 12 students to lift that profile — and I know Ballarat university does that — I think they miss out on opportunities. I do not think they talk enough to their constituent schools. When I was at Ballarat university setting up a degree called BEd BTech, I set up a principal reference group for the education there. As soon as we stopped, the reference group stopped, yet we had set up for them this linkage with their schools, but universities are strange, are they not?

Mr HALL — Monash University, for example, provides for some scholarships at a regional level to attend Monash Gippsland from Gippsland schools. Even we as a party have offered a small scholarship to country students.

Mr ALLEN — And Ballarat does that.

Mr BROWN — And there are examples — for example, the Rural City of Wangaratta offers an engineering scholarship for one student every year, and that is on the basis that you come back and work over the school holidays, but you study an engineering program. They are not coordinated in their bits and pieces.

Mr ALLEN — I think it is more promotional, being self-serving, rather than really getting to the heart of what the issue is to get the kids there. It is more a lip service at marketing, really.

Mr HALL — Is there a role for state government to get involved in that? I can remember many years ago under a previous government we funded 5000 places at university. I do not think they were specifically country, but is there a role that state government could play in regard to providing a greater opportunity to country kids?

Mr ALLEN — I think so, and I think it is also in the accommodation area.

Mr HALL — In the accommodation area?

Mr BROWN — One logical thing that I think we could really do at a state level is that notion of supporting the transition — looking at accommodation, looking at support services, that brokerage model, the information flow-back, even just simple, 'Here's a dozen V/Line tickets to go home'. Those sorts of things I think would be really quite attractive.

Mr HALL — With a statewide public transport pass applicable to both country and city?

Mr BROWN — Exactly.

Mr ALLEN — It is that first year.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for your time.

Mr ALLEN — I hope our information was useful.

Committee adjourned.