

CORRECTED VERSION

EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

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

Ouyen — 3 June 2008

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Mr M. Goldsworthy, acting principal, and

Ms C. Torpey, teacher, Ouyen Secondary College.

The CHAIR — I am happy to declare this hearing of the Education and Training Committee open. I advise that the evidence provided to the committee in this inquiry on geographical differences as they relate to participation in higher education is subject to parliamentary privilege, so Malcolm and all contributors can say whatever they like and know they are covered by parliamentary privilege. But I doubt whether you will need that. It is good to be in Ouyen today at Ouyen Secondary College, and we are pleased that you are going to be the first to introduce us to the school, Malcolm, and share your views and experience in regard to tertiary participation from this region and the issues associated with that.

Mr GOLDSWORTHY — Thanks, Geoff. What I am going to say is also on the handout which is available and which will guide me. I have split what I want to say into three areas. One is what I believe are common barriers across the whole state; the second section is around extra barriers for rural students — rurality; and the third section is really around some possible solutions, which is probably what we are more interested in. I will go through the common ones fairly quickly because I know you would already be very aware of them, but the reality is that these are the barriers I believe exist to young people who may be considering a move towards higher education. The first and obvious one is HECS fees. It has been around for a while, but it is there; it is a cost. I know that it can be deferred, but there is a cost, so people see it as a cost to education. I am not defending it or attacking it, but I am saying it is a reality.

Probably more important is the second point, accommodation and food. Recent rent and food increases really are putting more and more of a strain on all young people. I have got two daughters at uni in Melbourne currently, and I suppose comparative to the average population we are not in poverty, but I know there are many occasions when they are actually doing it tough. Parents have a decision to make: do I supplement, do I top them up all the time, or do I actually say, ‘No, this is a learning experience for you. If I keep giving you money and giving you money and giving you money, you are not actually learning and developing your own skills of resilience and living’? At the same time it is not a nice situation when your kids cannot go out, cannot do this and cannot do that because they physically have no money. I think the reality is there for people from middle-class families, so for anyone under that socioeconomic group it is going to be even tougher and a major factor.

I am certainly aware — I spent my last 20 years in Bendigo — that there is an increasing number of students now who are taking a gap year, a year off, and I am also confident in saying that a lot of those students do it mainly so that they can qualify for the living away from home allowance from Centrelink. Some have the moral decision to travel or do different things, but the reality is a lot of those students around Bendigo do it to work, to get money so they can qualify for a living away from home allowance from Centrelink while at uni. The danger is of course that if they get used to that lifestyle of having a regular income, having a car and being able to have a little bit of independence, the thought of 12 months later going to a university student existence may not be quite so appealing. I think the danger is that you lose students in that 12 months off.

I think, too, for those people that possible four years-plus of being a student and living poorly compared to the reasonable income of their peers, which they may have experienced in the workforce, can be a strong factor. I think that some of the support strategies such as Centrelink have not really kept pace with the cost of living. I know it is out of your control, but I think it is a factor, that even if they do qualify for allowances, they are not really keeping pace with rental costs in Melbourne.

On extra barriers for rural students, what I have said so far I think is common across the whole state, but mainly for students from this area and all rural areas, living at home is never an option, so that option of reducing your education costs by living at home and reducing accommodation, rent and food costs is not an option. The vast majority of courses involve living away from home, with the accompanying costs of housing and food. Rural students are also more likely to have assimilation problems, especially if they are moving to the big city. I am talking Melbourne here, or Adelaide for a lot of students from this school. Coming home for a weekend to ease the transition is often not an option due to distance. I know my girls in Bendigo probably in the first 12 months would come home every two to three to four weeks, just come back home. So if they are having problems, they can always come back home for a weekend to sort of sort things out a little bit. When you are living in a rural, remote area the cost and the physical difficulty of getting home is not there, so it puts added pressure on rural students in that transition.

If that is coupled with cost-of-living expenses for rural students, such as accommodation costs — they are living away and have no choice — again, all those things can accumulate, and sometimes it can all become a bit too difficult, and the option is to just give it away and come back home and work. Holding down a part-time job to give

some cash flow, which most parents would encourage in their students, is not often quite as straightforward for rural students. The reason is, if they are staying in university hostel accommodation, they are literally evicted during the holiday periods; they do not have access to their rooms. So if they do have a part-time job, they have to either find alternative accommodation in Melbourne — rental, motels or whatever — to keep up that work over the holidays or they have got to say, 'No, I'm not available for two or three or four weeks during the holiday period', and often they will lose out on the job. So holding down part-time jobs can be difficult, because you are evicted from your university accommodation.

Another barrier for rural students is that the complexities of farming businesses make many rural students not able to access youth allowance. Most farmers are, especially in current economic times, capital rich but cash poor, so they often do not stack up that well in terms of meeting the requirements of Centrelink or youth allowance, and again a lot of the students who are in need actually do not qualify for youth allowance, and as such neither would they qualify for Commonwealth Learning Scholarships because they do not qualify for Centrelink; the two things go together.

Solutions: the common thread is better resourcing. I know it is always, 'Give us more money', but I cannot think of a really concrete solution to a lot of these problems other than better resourcing. The common denominator is finance, and I think better resourcing is the solution. How might that be allocated? I think the Centrelink payments need to be updated for tertiary students. It might be considered that perhaps all tertiary students should just get some Centrelink payments because the qualifying standards and requirements really are extremely complicated. I know that sometimes my daughter qualifies and sometimes she does not; it is taken on the previous eight weeks. If she has been working in the holidays she does not qualify. There is always a lag between when you get your money and when you qualify for your money, and so there can be a big gap — a poverty gap — when students get money. The process of accessing Centrelink is really not clear.

Rural students should receive some subsidy towards accommodation at university because they do not have a choice. I think that would be a very positive move, and it would reduce the cost on rural families. We have rural scholarships and they are definitely invaluable. As you will hear later this school has been very successful in accessing scholarships, but the very fact that they are scholarships means they are not available to all; they are accessed by a combination of the needy, obviously, and also those students who are best supported and go through the application process. I think scholarships work but they are not as easily accessible as it might appear.

Targeted schemes work. In the past we have had targeted schemes for rural families for medicine, for science and for nursing. They work, but again they are selective in their definition. It is some form of affirmative action which can have a positive impact. While I am on that point, I think teaching should form part of a targeted affirmative action at the moment because there is a dire shortage of teachers.

Finally, in terms of solutions I think that the education system, and we are part of that, really needs to be better resourced in terms of career pathway counselling. As you will see presently, I think this school performs very well in that area. I believe that some of our positive results are due to pathways counselling.

I believe this school is not typical of most rural schools. Ouyen Secondary College has a strong record of tertiary take-up with its year 12 students. Over the past decade the take-up rate for exiting year 12 students to tertiary education has been averaging over 95 per cent. At a cursory glance this success rate would indicate that all is well. You might say, 'What is the problem here? You have 95 per cent of your kids accessing higher education. Where is the problem?'. I think you have to investigate a little bit further than that and indicate how this school has actually overcome those difficulties, because the same difficulties are definitely here. All the things that I explained before about rural isolation and accommodation costs are still true for this community. There are few local employment opportunities, particularly for females. Apprenticeships are predominantly male oriented. Traineeships for young females are often very competitively sought after by women returning to the workforce and retraining. Ouyen does not face any fewer difficulties than other rural areas. The question to ask here is why? Why has this community still retained a strong tertiary pathway for its young people despite challenging financial and remote circumstances?

I have listed some of the reasons that I believe, and I have only been in the school this year, explain the apparent paradox. One, we have a very strong community tradition and expectation of tertiary pathways. People want the best for their kids and understand that leaving town and taking up higher education is the best option in terms of giving them choices

A culture of excellence and high achievement within the school has been firmly established. It needs to be worked on continually, but the culture has been established. The school has made strategic decisions to support classes that offer tertiary pathways — for example, chemistry and physics exist in the school despite very small groups. That is a local school decision and puts pressure on a school's budget. Other schools might make different decisions, but because we have a strong expectation from the community of providing a tertiary pathway we have to provide those specialist subjects at years 11 and 12. There is a huge statewide shortage of maths and science teachers, and keeping this pathway going is going to be difficult, and even more difficult in the years to come. We cannot get maths and science teachers, let alone teachers who are able to teach at VCE level, let alone able to teach at a high level.

The school has made workforce planning decisions to support tertiary pathways. This has taken the form of Cheryl, who is employed at the moment, and 0.5 of her allotment time is in career counselling pathways. There is a whole lot more stuff in there, but basically we are paying for half a teacher to provide career counselling to our students in a school with 165 students. I know that a lot of schools would not have half a teacher paid for, so that is a local decision which this school makes. That gives us huge results; it gives us a huge and positive outcome, but it is a decision we make, and it comes out of our school budget. Again, some schools will not make that decision. My view is that schools should be resourced more powerfully around careers counselling.

I am sure you are aware of what is called MIPs funding — Managed Individual Pathways funding — which has been in the school for probably the last six to eight years. It is very successful and very targeted and has had great outcomes. It should be retained. However, MIPs funding for our school is \$6000 and 0.5 of a teacher is about \$30 000, so there is a disparity there. We are getting about \$6000 to counsel students in MIPs; it is actually costing us \$30 000. There is a disparity of costs. We have also been very fortunate in having a very passionate and committed staff member who has been a major factor in getting our student outcomes.

I would summarise three things about why Ouyen has been successful, and it has probably been against the trend. One, we have a culture of high expectation and higher education pathways. Two, we have put in workforce planning to support careers pathway counselling in the school at a cost; and three, we have a person who actually does that job damn well. Those are the three things that I think have made our results very good, but I would hate you to go away and say, 'All is great; all is okay there because look at the results'. It is results, but we still have the same issues and families in Ouyen still face the same difficulties. I will stop there because I want to let Cheryl have a say.

The CHAIR — You have some other comments that you would like to add first in terms of your role in the school and your observations of students progressing and making decisions about tertiary education.

Ms TORPEY — I will pass some of these papers around and you can have a look at a little document we prepared for you based on the kind of thing that gets released at the On Track time. It gives you a bit of last year's profile. For us it is very much about faces, and we are small enough that faces have whole stories. Hidden in the statistics are some wonderful details that we might get time to talk about, but it is not the core crux of my agenda at this stage. I have a few documents I would like to hand out to you to support that, so I am adding a bit of embellishment to what Malcolm has suggested.

I want to start with my five wishes. I guess you are hearing from an Indian, and I have a few suggestions. Again, I would like to back up what Malcolm suggested about the Managed Individual Pathways initiative. For Ouyen Secondary College that has really hit pay dirt for us. I was privileged to be on the college leadership committee, and I think you will hear people tell you that it is great to have your careers people — your MIPs people — in a leadership position in the school. I was in on the grassroots conversations when that initiative was getting up. The Managed Individual Pathways has made a genuine difference to our student outcomes at Ouyen Secondary College.

Just to give you one little example — and there are many, many more — we use the MIPs funding to support those transitions to the big smoke. Our year 11 careers camp, as we call it, is a simple example. It provides city orientation, lots of people are doing that; it gives students exposure to universities and to TAFEs, lots of people do that. We also build in industry-based visits, taking them to a work site where they can see a whole range of occupations, to organisations like Caterpillar, Toyota, Cummins — all sorts of things. It is targeted around the cohort's needs so each year it can be quite different.

What is special about our program, which most other people do not have, is we have incredible parental support for this program — in fact we almost have 90 per cent participation. So on board that coach on our grand adventure we have a mum or a dad from the family coming along as well. The best I have been able to do is around \$250 per person as a cost estimate that we operate on for three days. We do it pretty intensively: one day for students day, a weekend, two days of a school week; and we have 13 to 15 parents on board with us. They get to have that interface, to get that dialogue going and the family support happening. It is just fantastic. It has been overwhelming. One family, for example, bore the cost of twins going as well as a parent, and none of the food is built into that. That family would have contributed well in excess of \$1000 to making sure that their child, as a year 11 child, was well preparing themselves and they were preparing themselves to support them.

By contrast, before MIPs funding came into the school — and as Malcolm suggested we do not use it to source my role, that is out of a separate budget — I had a \$500 budget. I would buy two boxes of stamps for the work experience process and I could have 100 photocopies, so we have come a long way. The MIPs funding is actually to develop the programs as it was intended for.

Another thing I would really love to support and applaud while I have your attention is the school-based apprenticeship initiative. It has been incredible for us as a small school. We have massive limitations because of our geographical isolation to offer vocational education and training programs in the depth and complexity that most city or regional schools could do. The school-based apprenticeships have been a great supplement for students to be able to expand their repertoire. I do not know as I did not work out the statistic, but we are working on around 10 to 12 students engaged in school-based apprenticeships out of our 15-plus cohorts so, say, roughly 90 students. Our statistics are quite sound comparatively speaking.

Unfortunately, what is happening is as it is growing there is not any school-based support for school-based apprenticeships. There is no resourcing in there so it has been encompassed into my position basically, and what the school can service out of the existing budget. It is swelling and it is growing. It is becoming more rigorous and more demanding. To give you an example, at the moment for a small school I am liaising with 5 different RTOs, 5 different training companies, obviously 10 to 12 different individual employers, 10 to 12 families, students running separate curriculum needs and a supervision level when they are not engaged. Some kids are integrated — that is, we give them time-release; they need to be supervised. Some students do it as an after-school thing and in school holidays. We are lucky with agriculture here in that the busy time of agriculture tends to be in school block time, for example, so the sowing is now, long term right now but normally fits into the holidays. Students are free for the harvests so they actually can meet the minimum hours requirements. But more and more of our students are now taking it as an integrated part of their curriculum.

The third program — I believe it is a DEEWR program; excuse me if the acronym is outdated — the youth pathways, formerly the jobs pathway program, initiative is fantastic. It is a model that I cannot herald enough because it is an agency support that goes beyond the school, and they really do make a difference to our students. Given our isolation, we have minimal access to this person or the people who run the program, and their caseloads and their whole structures are changing all of the time, and that is challenging.

But the fact that they have a reach beyond the school, that they can build a trust with a young person, and if they disengage from us here as a site and I cannot keep my claws into them, or the staff cannot support them, we know that there is an agency or body that will follow along with that young person. The coordinator's case loads, as I said, are expanding and unfortunately the contact is being reduced. Clearly the most at-risk young people need more than a once-a-month pop-in visit. They need much more contact and more face-to-face contact rather than using teleconferencing or telephones or text messaging and all those other things. So it would be great to see that program supported and enhanced further. So there are three outstanding programs that make my life and the role I do in supporting students, and the role the college does in supporting students, much more successful.

In terms of other things that are challenges, areas that I would love your support with further — and again I know some of them are federal and some of them state — are the special entry access schemes. They have become the most time-consuming, unwieldy features of kids applying for higher education. We would not be doing as good a job as we are if it were not for the fact that I have a time application that allows me to support them, but it falls far short. Because of the paperwork and bureaucracy surrounding it, it really does require one on one. We have up to 100 per cent of our year 12 parents whose children are applying for university who come in for at least one if not three sessions to get them through that process.

As you are aware, some of the universities have got their act into gear and come under the umbrella of the SEAS application scheme through VTAC, but unfortunately not many — I think Monash University, Melbourne University and Deakin, end of story — for the commonwealth supporting scholarships that come under the scheme. It would be fantastic to get more compliance and support from all of the universities so that at least the process was going to do it in one portal. At the moment, it is a case of the kids getting online, and if they happen to be applying for those three tertiary institutions then they are lucky. But then we have to have another session to apply for La Trobe and then we have to have another session to apply here and there. Being in a tri-state corner we actually work with supporting students to apply for South Australia; we have up to 50 per cent of our kids apply to South Australia. And we have maybe 10 to 20 per cent of the kids applying to New South Wales. If we have a student that is applying for medicine, as wisely encouraged, they even apply internationally.

The role is enormous now, and that equity and access that is meant to be put in place to support rural students is huge and it is not really hitting pay dirt. We have 100 per cent of Ouyen Secondary College students applying to university who will apply for Commonwealth Accommodation Scholarships, which rural kids are meant to be eligible for. I would be lucky if I get one or two a year that actually receive it. Statistically it is just not washing up. The learning scholarship, the more lucrative of the two commonwealth support schemes there, we have very few, and as you would be aware they have to be Centrelink recipients before they are eligible to apply for that one so it works for some but not for others.

New South Wales has a fantastic model under which it has all of its universities participating. I know it is a great big fat application process, but once you have done one you have applied for the lot. That umbrella approach is something that I would love us to be able to move towards. I have spoken to the Indians at VTAC when I have a chance to interface with them, and they have indicated that they have not had the whole university support to actually take it any further than they have. We have been there for a long time now, and you would think if it were going to happen it would have.

Accommodation, accommodation, accommodation: the kids do the right thing. They get the right curriculum, they have the ENTER, they have got into university. The accommodation is a huge part of my role in supporting families. It is enormous. I would love to see some positive discrimination for rurally-isolated kids put into the system. I know we are talking about a whole heap of different agencies that you may or may not have fingers in the pies of, but that would be fantastic. Deakin University — the Waurn Ponds campus to be specific — we have had to engage in major coercion to get our students actually into accommodation there.

For some of our most at-risk children, the first in their families to do university degrees, there are no support structures in place to get them accommodation. I have got one this year who is living in private accommodation in Geelong. That is a huge step without all that pastoral support, that academic support. We say on-campus accommodation, at least in your first year, provides successful transition outcomes, yet we cannot guarantee the kids get in there. You will hear other examples. I have a submission from the Woodall family here whose story is similar. Commonwealth Accommodation Scholarships, as I have already said, we do not get too many with any remuneration support for them anyway.

The definition of higher education is always a little bit hard, and it did vary in how you interpret it, but even accommodation support for apprentices — kids are going off to TAFE as well in really shonky areas. I have got a student down at Kangan Batman TAFE in Melbourne who really wants to do aviation engineering. He has got into the course. It has taken him months to get accepted. He is living in a caravan in Broadmeadows. Is that what we do for our high flyers?

Apprentices, because they live 50 kilometres out of town — look at our isolation. Their parents have to drive them to work and back every day because there is no public transport system. They do not get any living away from home allowance because they are not within the framework of kilometres ratios. The parents drive them to work every day because they are not quite 18. They might have to do that for two years.

The regional universities and TAFES — and I know I am going to be controversial here — but, gee, they need some more support. I will use a specific example. Mildura nursing looks impressive. It is, 'Wow! You can do nursing in your local' — for us 100 kilometres away is local — 'university now, and it goes all the way through. Fantastic!'. It is online out at Bundoora. It is the most disengaging incentive to make a successful transition. So much of the course is being delivered telematically. There is not that cohort engagement in the learning when you are shifting from this environment. You will hear people say, 'Going and sitting in a lecture with 400 people is a

transition'. Imagine trying to engage in your first year in valuable learning, your passion, and you are watching a computer screen where you cannot have that intensive dialogue with your classmates. If we are going to have tertiary rural campuses, also have a look at the quality and how you are delivering at those campuses and the resourcing for them.

On a personal gripe of mine — I manage work experience. Work experience is valuable, guys. It really is valuable. There is a lot of support with the local learning employment networks — all the LCP initiatives, the support structured work placement. It is no use to small rural schools that have not got lots of VET programs. Work experience is one of the best vocational, on-the-ground tools for kids. There is virtually no support out there to keep it going. The bureaucracies and the challenges to keep those initiatives running are a massive disincentive. Some schools are dropping it like nobody's business.

Young people have things like middle-band selection for health sciences. It might say something like, 'demonstrated work experience will be considered for selecting a person', and yet the kids cannot get work experience and are not supported to do that. Our parents pay a week's accommodation to stay in Melbourne at a motel to make sure the kids have access. But, as I said, there is no infrastructure in place to support that program. It is almost like the poor brother of the structured workplace learning initiative.

Finally, in relation to vocational guidance in schools, your careers people need to be trained, they do need to be qualified. It would be great if they were teachers and it would be great if they were in leadership support. I wanted to use this opportunity to bag the LLEN initiative and say, from my experience, there has been absolutely no outcome successes for Ouyen Secondary College students as a result of the LLEN initiative. I have personally — and the school has supported me — contributed hundreds of hours attending steering committees, driving to support the initiative. I was there at the grass roots. I can still honestly say there was not one outcome that has hit pay dirt for Ouyen Secondary College. I liaise with people across the Sunraysia district. We have got a great association here. It is not just careers teachers; it is a massive diversity of industry people. I think you will hear the same comment. I will not go into a great deal of depth because you guys have got lots about that.

I wanted to just mention and share with you — and I will hand out a couple of brochures that we prepared that you can have a look at at your leisure — the kinds of things that Ouyen Secondary College does in the work readiness curriculum so that you can see it is not just about the 11s and 12s here. It starts at grassroots. It also has a little bit of a preamble about the kinds of hours that the role that I perform at Ouyen Secondary College requires to achieve the outcomes that we have achieved.

The final thing I will table — it is a little bit out of context — because I have the document is the Woodall family's submission, which you can take into consideration. It is family that could not be here because, as you know, most of the university students that we would have loved to have had come back and speak to you are all in the middle of exams right now.

The CHAIR — Thanks, Cheryl. We might have a couple of questions before we then move on with the students, after which we can still come back, I presume, for questions with you at that stage.

Mr DIXON — Just a quick one: I noticed there were four deferred students. Is that the usual sort of percentage? What are they doing? Are you confident they will return to the learning they were going to originally do?

Ms TORPEY — Thank you for picking up on that. The devil is in the detail. The short answer is no, we do not normally have many deferred students at this school. That would, I hope, reflect to some degree my bias and counselling. It is about individuals and having a legitimate reason for deferral. On the statistics you are referring to there, I am expecting two of those will engage and two of them will not. A fantastic — because I have the contact with the students — number of our students will apply to go on to higher education. Unfortunately we lose our control over them. I suspect two of those students will not continue on. They will have applied. We have control over the process. We will sit down with their families, make sure they have a go at it and give them the opportunity. One, I expect, will engage and stop. One of them wants to join the police force. As you know, that is really a second career. There is no direct pathways into some of these professions that are saying they need staff. I wonder how long she will be able to hold out for, filling up her time in the meantime.

The CHAIR — I am interested to get a sense on the students who have gone on to tertiary study; are they lost from the community in their ensuing life? Do some of them come back?

Ms TORPEY — We have got fantastic professionals in our community that are actually expats, if you like, from Ouyen Secondary College. Statistically, people do come back. We have students who will come back and still participate in football. You will often have car-pooling arrangements and informal arrangements where they will continue to try to engage in their communities. The local sporting clubs and organisations try to nurture that. They have incentives like petrol allowances and all sorts of things, but obviously it depends on whether the student has full-time employment to support them where they are, how far away they have gone. Students can be in Orange, students from this school could be in Adelaide, students could be in Melbourne. Those that tend to go to the regional campuses are able to maintain more access that way.

In terms of graduates, we have expats on staff — a number of them here at the secondary school. We have local young people who have gone off and are agronomists in the community now, local scientists, primary school teachers and the like. We do get them back.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Both you and Malcolm said the careers teacher 0.5 is vital. You have decided to have 0.5; other schools have not. You see there is much use for a careers teacher in your school. What else are the universities doing? Are they coming out to visit the school? Are they sending information officers out to advise students on what courses are available, what scholarships are available? Are you getting any assistance from the universities or TAFE into the school?

Mr GOLDSWORTHY — Yes, they do offer their services. We take them up whenever possible. We had somebody here from La Trobe last week, from engineering. That is good, but again you need someone in the school who is actually going to coordinate a service like that. The only way it can work is if you have got someone in the school. Most schools would have a careers teacher, but the key is how much time do you actually devote and give that person to actually do the job. Whether you have a school of 500 or whether you have a school of 150, you still need to have a careers teacher with a significant time allowance so those 150 kids get the same service as the school of 300.

Mr KOTSIRAS — So you would be able to work full time as a careers teacher?

Ms TORPEY — Easily.

Mr GOLDSWORTHY — Cheryl saw me last week and was demanding more time for her job, and she has petitioned me with a list of all the stuff she does. I have no question that she is very deserving of more time. My problem is how I am going to create that, because if I give her more time, it is costing me money and it has got to come from somewhere else within my school budget. That is why I am saying that, to me, pathways counselling should be like the MIPs; it should be a targeted piece of funding that goes in the school budget, separate from the school budget. It should not be, ‘You have got to sort that out in your school budget’.

Ms TORPEY — I would like to add to that. My point about the timing and the careers location is that we are obviously achieving things and successes, and we know that other schools do not. That request is bigger than Ouyen Secondary College. I know the amount of time that it demands of me, and I would say I add 50 per cent more than what I get allocated, like all professionals and teachers do. I am on a teaching wage; it encourages that, I guess. I have seen models where other schools have got SSO placements and proportions happening now, or they have broken up the role into many faces. We are privileged that we have got an integrated role.

In terms of the universities, they have been fantastic. With university support, the liaison staff are incredible. I have never had a knock-back from any of them. They do come here. They will allow us to go and have site visits, so we use the mixture of those combinations. There are some incredible programs out there. As a purchaser of many programs, the most exciting one I have ever seen would be the University of South Australia’s USANET program, as they call it, where they actually track the rural student and make contact with the student after they have left their secondary school and are already enrolled and operating. That contact person — that liaison person — interfaces with them at the secondary school level. They have genuine bonuses because of rural and regional, and there is incredible longitudinal data that tells you how successful their program is. That is probably the most exemplary scheme I have ever seen, and I am led to believe that that scheme is even at risk and the university might be knocking it on the head. Out of all the initiatives I have ever seen on liaison and supporting rural kids’ transition to university, that would be the most outstanding.

Mr KOTSIRAS — What actual support or assistance do you give to students who wish to achieve higher ENTER scores? Is there anything more that you can offer those students?

Mr GOLDSWORTHY — I would say the answer is no, there is no extra. What we offer here, though, is usually very small student-staff ratios in those classes, so a lot of them are virtually getting a tutor-type approach. There is one example, I suppose, which is excellent, where we have a student enrolled in distance education in chemistry — one student. I cannot staff one teacher with a student, so despite the fact that they are enrolled in distance ed and completing that course, as a school we have employed an outside tutor to come in and work with our student individually. Again, that is at our cost. As I was saying before, this school has made a decision to enable pathways to higher education to exist, but it is a decision made at the local level, and the cost is out of the school budget. In a small school with small numbers, sometimes it is hard to justify, but we do it because it is what the community wants.

Ms TORPEY — To add to that, I would like to suggest that we have been building a strong emphasis and culture over the last 15 years of English, because it is a core subject. To answer very specifically, the kids understand the process and there is a whole community culture to respect that this is going into your ENTER, so it matters.

We have always sourced our advanced chemistry and maths-sciences, no matter how — do or die! We offer specialist maths face to face, and we offer physics et cetera, and they are the priorities with rare exception. Obviously we have got the benefit of class sizes being small, and that does make a difference — teachers do not have to spend quite as much time doing massive assessment. They can spend a lot more time and focus on preparation and delivery.

We make sure that our kids and our parents know the system so that they can sit there and work out the mathematics of it as well. Rightly or wrongly, it is about individuals, but being aware of how the system operates — the ENTER system, the tertiary access structure. I believe that our years 9-to-12 curriculum is very focused on making sure that it is a continuum in forming the groundwork towards what they have to be able to achieve in year 12 as well to get those high ENTERs.

For instance, our year 9s and year 10s will have a taster of physics and a taster of chemistry, and that is core embedded so that when they are making subject choices they are making them based on some concept of their skills and abilities and what the subjects involve. It is a real continuum curriculum. It is not just about years 11 and 12; it is years 7 to 12.

Mr HERBERT — I was just looking at the VCAA and your VCE studies for the school. It counts 28 — is that correct — separate subjects that are taught at VCE?

Ms TORPEY — Could be.

Mr GOLDSWORTHY — No; we would not be teaching 28 VCE subjects.

Ms TORPEY — Is that counting years 11 and 12?

Mr HERBERT — It is 11, sorry.

Ms TORPEY — Is it 11 and 12, that data? A composite?

Mr GOLDSWORTHY — It could be total 11 and 12 — semester 1 and semester 2.

Mr HERBERT — I am just trying to see how you structure this. You have said you have got small class sizes. You had 26 students last year in year 12 — extra students — so you have got some small class sizes. Does that mean you have run quite a few with distance education, or does that mean that you bulk up your class sizes in the junior years? How do you literally offer a large number of electives to 26 year-12 students?

Mr GOLDSWORTHY — By juggling the school budget. We do not top up lower classes, so none of our classes here are greater than 25 — in fact they are all less than 25 — so no-one is being topped up. We have got small numbers. The budget formula does give rural schools slightly more staffing to enable small classes — we say that upfront — so we are supported a little bit in that area because of those reasons.

Mr HERBERT — How many subjects would be done by distance education?

Ms TORPEY — One a year — maybe two, max.

Mr HERBERT — Just a couple?

Ms TORPEY — We used to have a telematics with the Mallee Track cluster where we could have some external delivery done across our sister school, so to speak, but that model has lost its funding and has not been sustained.

Mr HERBERT — Given your comment, Cheryl, on nursing at Mildura, how do you find distance education students who do distance education subjects? Do you find the outcomes as good — or worse or better? Have you got any analysis of that?

Ms TORPEY — Statistically there is no evidence. When we were running it I am led to believe the statistics indicated that our students were not disadvantaged by doing it by distance. If we compared it to the kids who were in the host school, so to speak, and the kids who were receiving it by distance, their marks were comparable or in excess of the host school that had the face to face.

Mr HERBERT — So the problem was with the technology, was it?

Ms TORPEY — Yes; absolutely

Mr HERBERT — It was separate. So Telstra could not offer the services you wanted?

Ms TORPEY — No, I think the funding went out of actually keeping the technology up. That was my understanding.

Mr GOLDSWORTHY — Realistically, moving forward, in the future it will be something that needs to be looked at. We are having great difficulties — and other schools are — in getting staff. If you have got small classes and you cannot get staff, you are going to have to share the expertise you have got amongst schools.

Mr HERBERT — Essentially you need decent broadband, decent computers and a system in place — —

Mr GOLDSWORTHY — That works!

Mr HERBERT — Rather than just a little camera on top of a computer.

Mr GOLDSWORTHY — Yes.

Ms TORPEY — It was really gorgeous with the blurred faces as someone shifted!

Mr HERBERT — What is your dropout rate prior to year 12? How many students leave school and seek employment before hitting year 12, or in year 11.

Ms TORPEY — I would proudly like to say that we have no-one leave who does not go directly into something. If you were sitting there looking at 10-year longitudinal tracking you might find an exception or two, but the norm for the community is — and the parents' expectation is — that they will be directly connected or else they do not leave school.

Mr HERBERT — No, I understand. I am just wondering, having said that, what percentage would it be? Would it be 10 per cent? You have got about 180 students.

Mr GOLDSWORTHY — I would say 20 per cent would not access higher education in terms of university entrance.

Mr HERBERT — No, I am talking about year 12 in school. How many go all the way through to finish year 12?

Ms TORPEY — Yes, you want to know our real retention data?

Mr HERBERT — Yes, what is your retention data?

Mr GOLDSWORTHY — Our retention data is about 70 per cent.

Mr HERBERT — To year 12?

Mr GOLDSWORTHY — Yes.

Mr HERBERT — So would they drop out before VCE?

Ms TORPEY — Yes. Very few people, once they start year 12, will drop out of the program, although we have got an exception this year of someone who got into Kangan Batman, as I said. That is the norm — maybe one or two in the last four, five or six years that I can remember.

Mr HERBERT — So you might have 20 per cent drop-out before VCE.

Ms TORPEY — Exactly; for year 10 and year 11 they will go off to apprenticeships and predominantly be the boys.

Mr GOLDSWORTHY — One of the difficulties we have is running a full VCE program, so to run an alternative program as well is difficult. That is where school-based apprenticeships have helped us a great deal to retain students. It is hard.

The CHAIR — Can I go back to the special entry access schemes that you mentioned, Cheryl. How many of your students would take advantage of that?

Ms TORPEY — One hundred per cent.

The CHAIR — They all take advantage of that rather than relying on — —

Ms TORPEY — I sit down and counsel every student and every family to take advantage of that if they are applying for higher education, yes. One hundred per cent apply. That is why I am saying that about intensive counselling. Some students may not choose — and they will be the exception — to not have their parents present in support at those conversations around it, or they might not need them because they are quite at home as independents. But by and large, given the kinds of questions that it asks, we will have parents come in, and more and more parents are now coming in to have those counselling and support sessions. But 100 per cent is what I work on. Obviously we are rural isolated, so 100 per cent are eligible.

The CHAIR — I think that has covered a fair number of our questions. You have given us a great deal of information, and that is much appreciated. We might hear from your students now, who are going to speak to us.

Mr GOLDSWORTHY — We have got two groups of students. The first group is of senior students who have actually got something to say to you; and the second group is of four year 8 students who we have not scripted at all. We thought that if they are in year 8 it might be useful for you to ask them about their aspirations and what their dreams are.

The CHAIR — Correct; we are very happy to operate on that basis.

Witnesses withdrew.

C O 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

Ouyen — 3 June, 2008

Members

Mr M. Dixon	Mr S. Herbert
Mr N. Elasmar	Mr G. Howard
Mr P. Hall	Mr N. Kotsiras
Dr A. Harkness	

Chair: Mr G. Howard

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Staff

Executive Officer: Ms K. Ellingford
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Witnesses

Mr P. Vallance,
Ms C. Manley,
Mr D. Leach,
Ms C. Johns,
Ms D. Singleton, and
Mr R. Monaghan, Ouyen Secondary College.

The CHAIR — I understand you are all seniors. We will start with you, Peter, since you were first to sit down. If any of you have said things that you want to let us know about first, do that, and then we will have some questions to follow up with.

Mr VALLANCE — I am Peter Vallance; I am a school-based apprentice. I am employed by Leonard and Faye Vallance, and they run an 18 000 acre property with 12 000 acres of cereal crops and 800 head of cattle. I am studying at Longerenong College as well as going to school, so it is — —

The CHAIR — This is in study blocks, presumably?

Mr VALLANCE — Yes. There are usually about four study blocks a year now out of first year, so I will go down to Horsham, where Longerenong is, for a week and do a flat-out class work down there for a week and then come back. There is only one a semester of school, so I do not miss too much.

The CHAIR — This is your first year?

Mr VALLANCE — This is my third year. I am doing certificate 3.

The CHAIR — So how much time do you spend at school here?

Mr VALLANCE — A lot — probably too much. I have that as my fifth subject, so I have a lot of extra spares and I get all my class work done. And to make up my hours, when I get home — I hit the doormat at 4.00 o'clock and I am back out at a quarter past, back to work. I work until about 8.30 and then go home. I am pretty flat out, but I love it. It is what I want to do.

Ms MANLEY — My name is Chelsea Manley and I am currently attending Ouyen Secondary College as a year 12 student. It being the most important year of my education, I place great importance on succeeding and achieving the best that I possibly can. Being a student at a small country school such as Ouyen Secondary College has helped me to reach my potential so far. One of the main advantages we have as a rural school over city schools is class size. Teachers are able to instruct students one on one and are able to provide assistance outside of class whenever it is required. This, of course, is extremely helpful as a year 12 student, as it is crucial to understand all the work we are doing.

However, once I make the transition to university, where class sizes are massive compared to what I am accustomed to, I am sure I will feel extremely uncomfortable and intimidated. It would of course be an advantage to have completed my secondary education in a larger school to have familiarised myself with the typical university environment. I also have concerns regarding the low level of teacher access at university, as I am used to having teachers available constantly. This will be a major adjustment for me and I will find it particularly hard to adjust to the different circumstances.

After completing my VCE I hope to pursue a career in physiotherapy or midwifery. However, as you may be aware, physiotherapy is particularly difficult to start a career in, as universities all over Australia have an extremely competitive ENTER. I find this extremely frustrating, as the ENTER does not reflect the difficulty of the course, but rather the popularity and the lack of courses around the country. This places a lot of pressure on students such as myself who need to achieve high ENTERs in order to pursue the careers they desire. There is already enough pressure on year 12s to complete the work in their subjects and to ensure that all work is submitted on time. Trust me: we do not need any more stress.

Honestly, I am absolutely petrified about moving away next year from my family and friends and the town that I have grown up in. This will be a huge change for me, as I am extremely dependent on my family. However, I do enjoy a challenge and love meeting new people, so university is the perfect opportunity for me to do this. Nevertheless, I am not concerned or anxious about the fact that I have little idea about where I will be living next year or what I will be doing. Next year I could be living in Adelaide, Melbourne or Albury, or I may even take a major step and find myself overseas. I find this very exciting and cannot wait to see what my future holds. Moving away from the people I love will of course be difficult, but university has the potential to offer me so much.

Being in year 12, I have been researching careers for the last few years. What has surprised me the most is how expensive it is to study, especially if it involves moving away from home. It is frightening to see in the media that

uni kids are struggling to eat, as they simply cannot afford food. This is very scary, and it is no wonder that country kids do not move away to the cities to study, as it is just too expensive.

Furthermore, I would like to say that I am thoroughly enjoying my last year of my secondary education. Even though I am counting down the days until my last exam, I am enjoying the time of when I have to make life-altering decisions and when I have to leave my loved ones and enter the big, wide world as an independent adult.

The CHAIR — That was well covered; thanks, Chelsea. Dominic.

Mr LEACH — My name is Dom Leach. I am going to talk briefly on why university and higher education do not interest me. The university courses relating to agriculture do not interest me. The entire university experience — the class structures, and the theory-based learning, as opposed to practical, hands-based education — is what is discouraging me from following in the footsteps of my brother and two sisters, who have gone on to higher education. Based upon the research and what I have acquired so far by listening to guest speakers, going to universities and viewing course brochures, there is not enough applied learning that will relate to what I need to do to work on the farm. After the completion of year 12 I plan to commence a full-time apprenticeship at my own family business, where I will be able to focus on sheep management, broadacre cereal cropping and machinery and farm maintenance practices.

I hope to expand upon what my father can teach me through pursuing additional TAFE training in this manner and obtain on-farm training delivery. I do not wish to pursue higher education or advanced TAFE qualifications beyond my apprenticeship training.

The idea of going to university to complete a three or four-year course following being at school for 13 years does not interest me. I would rather enter the workforce, earn a living and get my life started. Personally, I see going to university as making you put your life on hold. Getting involved in the workforce will allow me to begin my working life as I wish to. I know, through research and communication with my brother and sisters, that university can be a lot of fun and it is a large number of people's choice to further their education, but I want to get my working life started, build independence and begin planning for the future. By beginning employment after completing my VCE I will be able to become independent and start living my life the way I wish to. This is why I have chosen my career path and intend to follow it through.

The CHAIR — Thanks, Dom. Cheyenne?

Ms JONES — My name is Cheyenne Johns. I am a year 12 student. I have always planned to go to uni and there was never any alternative for me, even though as of yet I am not sure what I want to do. It has only been recently, since researching the idea, that I have become aware of the problems associated with going to uni, problems that many students living in the city may not have to face. I plan to go to a good uni in the city, and that means moving out. For me this is emotionally not a big deal. I moved a lot when I was younger and I am what the locals call a blow-in — my family has been living here for seven years now, but I am still a blow-in. But for some of my friends and classmates, this is a bigger deal than I can imagine. Some have never moved house in their entire lives and have never been away from their parents for an extended amount of time. These are the people who are going to suffer the most.

Of course, it is not only about moving away that is important when deciding to go to uni. The most prominent issue is the expense. Not only do our parents have to fork out money for the uni but that is only the beginning — the majority of the cost comes later. It is the extras that put the rural students at a disadvantage. I hope to rent a house with a friend in Adelaide next year, which means that as well as uni, there are rent bonds, furniture, car and electrical appliances as well as water and electricity. This is just to get us started. Then there is the ongoing cost of living, which is getting more and more difficult, due to the ridiculous price of everything.

University is a daunting enough experience as it is, without having to add to it by moving out, usually to a bigger town, and not knowing anyone. The actual feel of uni is also very different from what we are used to at school. For me personally, the bigger class sizes are going to be a huge change from what I am used to. I am the only student in one of my classes, and in another I am one of two. It will be hard to get used to being one of 50 or one of 100 or more and not having that personal one-on-one attention that so many of the smaller schools have. This is another factor that affects the country students making their choice to go to uni.

If the government and the education department are worried about the lack of Victorians, especially rural students, undertaking higher education, they need to make an effort to support us through this transition from year 12 to higher education. There needs to be more financial aid for the students, as well as the families who are sending their children off to university, to eventually better Australia and the economy. Yes, the opportunities for scholarships are in abundance and the education department wastes millions of dollars every year because of the lack of entrants to apply for these scholarships, but it is not so much uni that is breaking the bank; it is the extra living expenses once we are at uni that we need more assistance with. Getting into uni should not be about whether or not you can afford to live. It should be about what you have achieved throughout year 12 and whether you have qualified for the course you have selected. We should not be at a disadvantage just because we are rural students.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Deri?

Ms SINGLETON — I am Deri. I am currently studying year 9, and mathematics is my preferred subject. I like English, but I think that mathematics is equally as important as English. I am curious about why it is that English is deemed a more important study than mathematics. At this stage, mathematics and English are both compulsory subjects. However, at year 12 I feel that I will not be as advantaged in the VCE because my strengths are in the mathematics subjects and the sciences. I would like to see the primary four subjects used to calculate the ENTER based upon performance, and English should not automatically be one of these. Because I do not like reading books should not disadvantage my opportunity to achieve the maximum ENTER that I am entitled to. I am concerned that there are good students who fail English and who do have the skills that would make them successful in their preferred areas.

I am considering a future career in the field of medicine. I have been researching a career as a radiotherapist, anaesthetist or oncologist — the more scientific and technical of the medical pathways. Television has inspired some of these ideas. Recently I attended the local hospital open day, where I was able to obtain further information. These are careers where I will be unlikely to get work experience because the larger hospitals do not encourage students, let alone country students. Because our local hospital does not have these services, I have no role models to support my understanding of these careers.

I do not believe I will have too many academic challenges, but money will be a problem. I would consider studying at a local university if this was an option. I can visualise going to a regional or city campus in Victoria or South Australia, not too far away. I want to come home; I do not want to have to fly to see my family and friends. I am keen to work in rural Victoria, if there are employment opportunities in the country areas.

The CHAIR — Thanks, Deri. Last, Ryan. I notice that you have already provided us with a written submission, so you do not need to read the submission, but give us a summary.

Mr MONAGHAN — No. I have something different.

The CHAIR — Good. Thanks, Ryan.

Mr MONAGHAN — My key ambition at the moment is to pursue a career in physical education or the police force. I see these careers as being exciting. I will get to stay fit and they both have on-the-job excitement.

Living in our community, I am provided with opportunities that I might have to compete more for — for example, I have captained a junior cricket team and my tennis team and competed at state level in interschool cross-country, and only last week I had the opportunity to contribute ideas in a young leaders forum that will contribute to the planning of Ouyen for the future. All these experiences have inspired my passion to pursue my ambitions.

I have been lucky enough to have had great physical education and Victoria Police role models that have also helped motivate my ideas about my future career. However, I feel constantly challenged because of the distances I have to travel. The combination of fuel costs and the time factor restrict my ability to participate in many things, and I know that I will need to move away from home to forward any of my ambitions. Travel and the ability to afford a car so I can come home and continue with the community sport is going to be very expensive.

In spite of living in one of the most isolated areas of Victoria, I know that I will be unlikely to receive any government assistance and my family and I will have to afford these additional costs somehow. Because my mother works off farm, we are ineligible for any assistance, in spite of our farm barely making any money over the last 10 years. I have a sister already ahead of me and Mum and Dad are already supporting her accommodation, uni

expenses and vehicle and transportation costs as well as feeding her. Next year they will have to find enough to support me to do the same, and I have two brothers to follow.

I know that I am benefiting from small class sizes as I enter VCE, but I know the school struggles to get mathematics and science teachers. So far I have been lucky to have great PE teachers because graduates from the University of Ballarat seem to like coming here, and I hope that continues. I would like to see myself working in rural Victoria after I graduate. My major concern is the cost and travel that will challenge me in pursuing my goals.

The CHAIR — Thanks, Ryan.

Mr HERBERT — Thank you very much for your presentations. It is interesting for us to get a perspective from rural and country students on the challenges facing you. There has been a lot of talk about the fact that to get youth allowance you need to work for a year and earn so much money. Two views, really, have been put to the committee. One is that it is a disincentive and maybe students who do want to go on to university work and then they do not take it up if they defer for a year. The other is that it is not a bad thing to have a break from school for a year and really clarify what you want to do. What is your view of that? Do you think it is a good idea to have a break after school, or do you think you should just barrel straight into university?

Ms JOHNS — I think it depends on the individual. For me personally, I do not think I would be able to get back into it if I took a year off, because it is a learned thing — you learn how to study. Taking that year off would not benefit me, but some people say, 'We've been at school for 13 years and we just need a break', so I think it depends on each person.

Mr HERBERT — What about if every student could get it? In Israel, for instance, you finish school, you go into the army, you have a year and then you start university at about 22. Do you think that is pretty bad?

Ms MANLEY — Yes, I think you just need to get into uni and get started — —

Mr HERBERT — Get it over and done with.

Ms MANLEY — Yes, and get into the workforce like Dom said. Don't muck around.

Mr ELASMAR — This is a question for Dominic. You said you decided to have an independent life when you finish. Was that decision made because of a lack of accommodation or youth allowance or support from parents, or just because you want to live your life?

Mr LEACH — Yes, it was just my personal choice. I have always wanted to go onto the farm since I can remember. It has always been my passion, and as I said I have an older brother and two older sisters; one has graduated from uni and is now home for 12 months; one of my sisters and my brother both took a year off after doing very well in their VCE studies at school. They believe they are better for it because they took off a year. My personal choice is to go on the farm.

The CHAIR — Can I just follow up with you Dominic? I was an agriculture teacher in a former life and I had an interest in this area. When you go back onto the farm do you see there will be opportunities for you to do extra upskilling and extra training that you can do from the farm? What do you see is the future in that regard?

Mr LEACH — I think that through doing an apprenticeship, other than just taking employment, it gives me the opportunity to get qualifications for my skills and to complete courses. Yes, further my skills and qualifications.

The CHAIR — Who do you do the training through for the apprenticeship?

Mr LEACH — Possibly it would be through the Mallee Murray Training Company. There are a few around. I have been doing a bit of research and I think they would be the people I would be mostly likely doing it through.

Mr HERBERT — Dominic, you decided not to leave early and do an apprenticeship. You decided to do VCE as well. Why was that? Were you trying to hedge your bets just in case you want to do something different in the future?

Mr LEACH — I think I just wanted to finish what I had started. It is not much more out of your life if you leave in year 11; it is only another 12 months, or even less than that to finish year 12. In that way you have always got that backup; you have always finished your schooling. It is there if you ever need it, and it is not much time out of your life.

Mr HERBERT — Very good.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Can I ask: how important was having a careers teacher at school?

Ms MANLEY — Very, very important.

Ms JOHNS — Ms Torpey was champion. She puts in so much effort after school to make sure we get into what we want and have all the opportunities. Some of the schools do not offer those opportunities.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Do you think there is anything more that she could have done, or that a careers teacher could have done for you?

Ms MANLEY — Not really.

Mr MONAGHAN — She is pretty flat out at the moment. She is very hands-on. We can go in at lunchtime or at recess, or book a period of our class time to go and see her just to talk about anything you want regarding your future. As she said, everyone gets organised around year 10 and 11. I am in the process of doing that. I do not know that she could do much more at all.

Ms JOHNS — After school she puts in so much extra time for us that she does not need to do.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Can I ask the year 12s: at what stage did you decide what career path to take?

Ms MANLEY — Probably at year 11 work experience. I did physio up at Mildura Base Hospital and I loved it, so I have stuck at that.

Ms JOHNS — I am still unsure. I am looking at psychology and the sciences, or art — I am really into art. It is difficult because we only have one art subject and we do not have a lot of technology so it is a bit of a disadvantage to go to uni and do — say — a photography course, when there are students who have been doing specific photography courses for four years before me.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Have you had any information from TAFEs or universities coming down to you, or is information very hard to get hold of?

Ms MANLEY — They come to the school. La Trobe was here a month ago and they spoke to us about what they have to offer. We have gone on careers trips to universities. I think sometimes kids go to TAFE too.

Ms JOHNS — Ms Torpey organises a lot of that. She gets the contacts and gets people down here to talk to us and organises buses to Adelaide to look at all the universities around there. Yes, she does a lot of that.

Mr DIXON — Peter, did you say you were doing your apprenticeship on your farm?

Mr VALLANCE — Yes. My mum and dad are at home, but they are the boss.

Mr DIXON — Okay. That is great.

Mr VALLANCE — It is hard — —

Mr KOTSIRAS — Do they pay well?

Mr VALLANCE — No.

The CHAIR — The other question I had to follow up along that line was about the opportunity to save money before you go to uni. Are you able to get jobs, or will some of you end up on your parents' farms? Do they pay? Or are you hoping that later on they will assist? I am just interested to get some feedback — —

Mr HERBERT — Part-time jobs.

Mr LEACH — My older brother worked full time on the farm for a year before he went to uni, apart from six months that he spent at an Aboriginal mission in the Northern Territory. That is where his main funds came from. My older sister took a year off and worked and earnt money that way. I think there are opportunities around, but my sister had to go down to Melbourne. I think if you learn to look there are opportunities.

Ms MANLEY — I am in year 12 and I have a part-time job. I find year 12 too full on to fit around. If I go to uni next year then Mum and Dad will be helping me out.

Ms JOHNS — I have a part-time job but only one day a week or something like that. I plan to start working and get a full-time job as soon as I finish year 12 and then work for a few months until we start uni. A lot of people work during harvest. You get a lot of money through that. It is pretty full on. When I go to uni I plan to get a job as well.

The CHAIR — Good. Thank you for that. After we have finished with the year 8s we will be having morning tea, and it might be a chance to chat with you informally if you are still about. Thank you very much for the contributions you have made so far. It is always really helpful to get firsthand experience.

We have been collecting what has been said as we have gone along. Your notes will come back to the school later on for you to have a look at to see that you are happy with what was said. We will be compiling our report in the first half of next year. Thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.

CORRECTED VERSION

EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

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

Ouyen — 3 June 2008

Members

Mr M. Dixon	Mr S. Herbert
Mr N. Elasmar	Mr G. Howard
Mr P. Hall	Mr N. Kotsiras
Dr A. Harkness	

Chair: Mr G. Howard

Deputy Chair: Mr N. Kotsiras

Staff

Executive Officer: Ms K. Ellingford
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Administrative Officer: Ms N. Tyler

Witnesses

Mr J. Monaghan, year 8 student,
Mr K. Gallichan, year 8 student,
Ms K. Fidge, year 8 student, and
Mr J. Mead, year 8 student, Ouyen Secondary College.

Mr KOTSIRAS — You are year 8 students.

Mr GALLICHAN — Yes.

Mr KOTSIRAS — At this stage do any of you have any idea about what you want to do when you complete year 12, or is too early?

Mr MONAGHAN — Maybe agriculture or the police force or something like that.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Is that because you have heard about it, or is it something you have seen?

Mr MONAGHAN — Actually I live on a farm now, so that is where I get my interest from.

The CHAIR — You are tossing up between whether you would go back onto your farm, or — —

Mr MONAGHAN — Yes.

The CHAIR — Or whether you might do something like the police force.

Mr MONAGHAN — Yes.

Mr GALLICHAN — Something to do with art.

The CHAIR — With art?

Mr GALLICHAN — Yes.

The CHAIR — Okay.

Ms FIDGE — I was thinking about being an accountant or something like that.

Mr KOTSIRAS — And have you thought where you might do it? Which university?

Ms FIDGE — No, I have not thought about that.

Mr MEAD — I am not sure yet.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Still deciding?

Mr MEAD — Yes.

The CHAIR — Do all of you think you will go on to finish year 12, or do some of you think you might —

—

Mr MONAGHAN — Yes, I reckon I will.

Ms FIDGE — Yes, I will.

Mr GALLICHAN — Yes.

Mr MEAD — Yes, probably.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Have any of you got brothers or sisters who are at university or have gone through university?

Mr MONAGHAN — Yes, my sister is in her first year this year at Adelaide.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Doing?

Mr MONAGHAN — Nursing and midwifery, or whatever that is.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Anyone else? Have any of your parents gone through university?

Ms FIDGE — Mum was going to, but she didn't.

Mr HERBERT — This school has what is called a very good academic record. A lot of young people get very good marks at year 12 and go on to university, and those who do not still get good marks. How many hours homework do you get a week? Do you find that you have got a lot of work now; do you start early so you can do well at year 12 or not?

Ms FIDGE — Sometimes.

Mr HERBERT — How much would you have?

Mr MONAGHAN — It varies, I suppose.

Mr HERBERT — It varies, does it? A few hours a week?

Mr MONAGHAN — Yes, sometimes.

Mr HERBERT — Plus reading books and that sort of thing?

Mr MONAGHAN — Yes.

Mr HERBERT — What about sport; the school also has a really good sports reputation. Is that important to you?

Mr MONAGHAN — Yes.

Mr MEAD — Yes.

Mr GALLICHAN — Yes.

Mr HERBERT — Some people might think maybe if you do too much sport, you are not doing enough study. That is why I asked you about how many hours you do. What do you think? Do you think it is important to do both?

Mr MEAD — Yes.

Mr HERBERT — Do you think doing sport helps you with your schoolwork or not?

Mr MONAGHAN — In a way.

Mr HERBERT — In a way? Why? You could just study all the time.

Mr MONAGHAN — You need to have a break every now and then.

Mr MEAD — I suppose so.

Mr HERBERT — Do you think you will keep doing sport right up to year 12; is that important to you?

Mr MONAGHAN — Yes.

Mr MEAD — Yes.

Mr HERBERT — What about subjects; what are your favourite subjects? Do you have any?

Ms FIDGE — I don't mind art.

Mr HERBERT — That is a long way from accounting. What about you guys?

Mr MEAD — Probably a bit of maths.

Mr HERBERT — Maths, you like maths?

Mr MONAGHAN — Yes, a little bit of that.

Mr HERBERT — Do you think that will be useful on the farm or in your jobs?

Mr GALLICHAN — Yes.

Mr HERBERT — You do? Do you live in town?

Mr MEAD — Yes, sometimes. I sometimes live out on the farm as well.

Mr HERBERT — Okay, so how does that work? You have got a house on the farm and you have got relatives here, have you?

Mr MEAD — Yes. My mum and dad split up.

Mr HERBERT — So mum is in town?

Mr MEAD — No, Dad.

Mr HERBERT — Dad is in town. Okay.

The CHAIR — Can I ask: have you already had some time with your careers teacher? When do you get involved with talking with your careers teacher?

Ms FIDGE — Some of our classes have been involved with careers at the moment. Like, we are interviewing people with careers, and we are going to send away for a competition to win stuff and that.

The CHAIR — Was that earlier this year as part of year 8?

Ms FIDGE — We are doing it at the moment.

The CHAIR — Have any of you visited any universities or TAFEs?

Mr MEAD — No.

Mr MONAGHAN — No. Normally in year 9 or year 10 you sort of start.

The CHAIR — Yes, you do that as an organised thing, then. I did not know whether some of you might have visited other people who you might know at universities. At the moment you do not know what universities might look like exactly. You have seen pictures or imagined them.

Mr MONAGHAN — I have been over to see my sister before.

The CHAIR — Yes, you have seen where your sister is.

Mr DIXON — What do you parents want you to do? Have you talked about your future careers with your parents at all?

Mr MONAGHAN — Yes, I have. I think dad wants me to sort of keep on the farm, but then he wants me to do just whatever I want.

Mr DIXON — Okay. What about you, Kyle; what do your parents say?

Mr GALLICHAN — No, I am not sure.

Mr DIXON — They are not pushing you at anything at this stage or have any views on it. Kimberley?

Ms FIDGE — My mum is helping me achieve high marks so I can pick something that I want to do.

Mr MEAD — No, I haven't talked about it yet.

Mr DIXON — Fair enough. Plenty of years to do it.

Mr HERBERT — For those of you who travel, Joel and Joab, how long does it take you to get to school and back each day?

Mr MONAGHAN — I catch a littler bus from near my house and — —

The CHAIR — What time do you catch that bus?

Mr MONAGHAN — Maybe 10 to 8, and then I go for about 5 minutes into town — Tempy, out that way — and then I get on another bus, which I travel for about half an hour down to Ouyen.

Mr HERBERT — So you do not get much of a chance to do your homework when you are on the bus. You have to change a lot.

Mr MONAGHAN — Not really; I normally get home about 4 o'clock.

Mr HERBERT — Four o'clock; that is okay, then.

Mr MEAD — It takes about 45 minutes, I think, to get to school. I catch a bus from Walpeup at 10 to 8.

Mr HERBERT — What happens if you get detention? Do you ever get detention and miss the bus?

Mr MEAD — No.

Mr HERBERT — You always behave. It would be a long walk home.

The CHAIR — Thank you for that bit of feedback. It has been very helpful. We are going to have morning tea now. I think there is enough for everybody to stay around and have a chat with us. We are looking forward to talking to you informally.

Witnesses withdrew.

CORRECTED VERSION

EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

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

Ouyen — 3 June 2008

Members

Mr M. Dixon	Mr S. Herbert
Mr N. Elasmar	Mr G. Howard
Mr P. Hall	Mr N. Kotsiras
Dr A. Harkness	

Chair: Mr G. Howard

Deputy Chair: Mr N. Kotsiras

Staff

Executive Officer: Ms K. Ellingford
Research Officers: Ms C. Whiteman and Ms J. Hope
Administrative Officer: Ms N. Tyler

Witness

Cr V. Knight, deputy mayor, Mildura Rural City Council.

The CHAIR — The Education and Training Committee welcomes Cr Vernon Knight, the deputy mayor of Mildura Rural City Council. Thank you for coming to speak to us. We have been in Mildura for the last couple of nights, in between our Robinvale and Ouyen hearings.

Cr KNIGHT — I should say, Chair, that you are still in Mildura.

The CHAIR — I know I am in the municipality of Mildura, but the residents are very clear that we are in Ouyen. I am very pleased to have the perspective of your city council in regard to this inquiry into tertiary participation. I will leave it that. I look forward to your presentation, and then we will have some questions to follow up.

Cr KNIGHT — Thanks, Chair. Firstly, on behalf of council, I thank you for the invitation. As you would know, our municipality has had to grapple with many challenges of late, whether it is toxic dumps, droughts or whatever else. I would venture to suggest that the issue that is occupying this committee is the most important issue for this municipality, and I suspect the rest of Victoria. The education of our young people is paramount.

I should declare that I represent the council, but I do wear another hat. I will not venture into that territory but in my day job I am the executive officer of a group called Mallee Family Care; you had my colleague present to you in Robinvale yesterday in terms of some of the projects that we are doing.

With your permission, I thought I might go over a fairly large area here, because I think there are some things that I could potentially draw to the attention and interest of your committee about at least the observations that I and some of my council colleagues make. I think in that vein it is particularly significant that you should be meeting in Ouyen. I would be interested to know how Ouyen was chosen; I think it really is a very important choice.

My colleague in Robinvale will have alerted you to the work that we have done with Tony Vinson over time in trying to map where our communities are at. I am assuming that document has come to your attention at some stage.

The CHAIR — It has not yet; no.

Cr KNIGHT — I will table that for you. It is called *Mildura Social Indicators*. If I might, I want to share one page out of it. As I am sure you are aware, Professor Vinson has been a key figure in social analysis in Australia, and we at Mildura council have made use of his very generous services in trying to understand where our community is at on a range of particular issues.

The page that I have presented to you is a mapping of our community in relation to incomplete education. The graph will speak for itself. The mauve lines depict 'Did not complete year 12', and the maroon ones indicate 'Attendance at higher education'. Very clearly what it shows is that across the municipality we do not compare generally well with regional Victoria or metropolitan Melbourne, and that might well be something that you could say was fairly predictable. I think what is very significant — and this is probably the key to what I want to draw your attention, given the terms of reference that you have — is that the graph is very different if you track it across the municipality. You will see that the graph has been based on postcode areas — Red Cliffs, Mildura central, Merbein, Irymple.

Then we come to the one that showcases Ouyen, and very clearly the city you are visiting at the moment is the jewel in the crown as far as education is concerned in this municipality. I have to say that, as a social worker and maybe even as a councillor, I had struggled with that notion. I was well aware of the quality of education in Ouyen, but the disparity between Ouyen and the rest of the municipality I think is extremely marked. I spent many months, if not a year, trying to come to terms with why that should be.

I want to share with you a little story which hopefully will have some significance, because in the course of trying to understand that I did meet with school groups and community groups along the area that we call the Mallee Track, hoping that someone would come out with something quite insightful, and I was not let down.

At the end of a particular function an older woman in the audience came up to me afterwards and said, 'Vernon, you need to understand that these towns were built on migration. They were built on women who came here as teachers, nurses and kindergarten teachers and married farmers. They raised the bar for the community'. I have since road-tested that theory, and I am absolutely convinced that it is right. In fact what has happened in places like

Ouyen is an injection of female professionals who have come to these communities and have had greater expectations for their children, the grandchildren or their nieces or nephews.

That shows, I am sure, in preschool education, in early literacy, in, 'What are you doing at school?'. In fact she went on to say to me, 'It is the reason why, if you walk around Ouyen during the day, you will not see kids wandering, because someone in the town will ask them why they are not at school'. I think that is very powerful information, because at the end of the day organisations like mine and councils like mine actually need to take that potential and translate it into other communities. It may not be mum and dad who are going to be the stimulus to further education, but someone surely has to be. That is about raising the bar and raising the expectations for those kids. I share that one insight with you, and I think it is a particularly powerful one in terms of what we are seeing across our municipality.

I should add with some interest that a while later I spoke with David White, who some of you might know was at one stage the director of state outcomes in terms of mapping what was happening across Victoria. He said, 'I was head of the curriculum branch for the education department for many years. I had never understood why the Donald High School and the Boort high school performed better than Melbourne High School'. In fact I put it to the committee that you might want to look at some of those comparisons in terms of how the population has been built and what some of the drivers have been in terms of education.

Having said all of that, I guess the issue is: what do we do with that information. I am going to be so bold as to make a couple of suggestions. One you will have heard about in Robinvale, and that was around Chances for Children. That is an issue, and I will not repeat what Fiona would have told you yesterday, but it is about saying that money must never be a barrier to a kid in terms of further education. Irrespective of circumstances there has got to be capability within the community to fund those opportunities. I think that has been achieved with Chances. With something in excess of about 600 young people now, it is a remarkable outcome, not only for them but for our community.

The second thing we are working on at the moment is one that we are hoping will see the light of day in the next couple of months. We were approached by a major national foundation to do some piloting of work in terms of those kids who come to grief in the early stages of their secondary education, predominantly around forms 2 and 3, when clearly they are not up to their milestones and they are falling behind.

We are starting to look at some programs about how we re-engage with those kids, because most of them are so disengaged from the rest of their classes that they are not going to survive. They are different; they are seen to be the kids who are not performing, and as a consequence potentially a nuisance in the classroom. We believe the avenue there for us will be around technology. These are kids who may not be engaged with their classrooms, but they certainly engage with computers and iPods and things I do not even understand.

This is where I come back to Tony Vinson's work. Tony, as you would know, was the chair of the committee that reviewed public education in New South Wales, which completed its report about three or four years ago. I have had many conversations with him. Tony's conclusion out of all of that work was: 'Let me meet the child when he or she is 4 and I will tell you if they are going to survive at school'. In other words, the dye is cast before kindergarten. If in fact they have not grown up in a house in which there is some encouragement for literacy, exposure to books, exposure to good conversation et cetera, then they are going to arrive at kindergarten without the tool kit that will enable them to survive. Tony's belief is that you can track that all the way through primary school. I talk to the principals around this municipality; they will tell you about kids who turn up at secondary school who are already two years behind. Of course the ones that I referred to in forms 2 and 3 become the casualties of that system.

We are now looking at implementing some Reading Discovery programs which will work with families where there are 2-year-olds and 3-year-olds. Predominantly this is work that was pioneered down in the south-west by Claire Jennings. That finding is that it is not about exposing the children, these young toddlers, to literature; it is about exposing their mums. In many cases it may well be assisting mum to have the ability to read, because that is where it is falling over.

I know time is precious to you. I want to identify four issues, if I can, as far as council is concerned, in line with all those things I have just mentioned. I would say that essential to the future of our municipality, and regions like it, is access to higher education. We know the costs of having to ship kids to other places — it is significant — but we

have got representatives from both La Trobe and Monash here today; they have both got a very important presence in our community. They do it hard; it is an expensive exercise, and frankly the state and commonwealth need to understand that the investment simply must be made in ensuring their continuance.

I guess the other thing is around removing barriers. I could wax lyrical about the penalties that Centrelink will put in place to stop kids getting an education. I do not know whether Fiona raised with you yesterday the fact that if our community raises dollars to support this young person who has not got the financial ability to get an education, then Centrelink will determine that income for the purposes of youth allowance and chop it. It is an abhorrent situation. Our representation, state and federal, has borne no fruit. I would be delighted if it got picked up in the work of your committee. We can certainly give you all the documentation around it. Ironically, you would be interested to know there are actually three exemptions to Centrelink for scholarships. One is the foot and mouth artists association of Lichtenstein. There is some real Monty Python there, Chair.

The third thing is about maintaining infrastructure that is vital to growing the intelligence of communities. I will just flag in passing that currently we have an issue where someone has decided that our municipality would be better off without the CSIRO. You can only contemplate what the removal of 40 scientists — the top-end intellect of a community — can do in one fell swoop because it is deemed to be better located in Adelaide. There is a whole bunch of reasons why it must never go to Adelaide, and there are equally compelling reasons about not eroding the intelligence and the opportunities of communities like ours. I probably think I have said enough, Chair.

The CHAIR — Let us go to some questions.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Can I ask: has council currently got any scholarships available for students?

Cr KNIGHT — It does have, in two ways. One is in that it is a supporter of Chances for Children — you have heard about that program — but it certainly has in-house scholarships. I have to say that they are probably a bit self-serving, but we cannot get planners. Whether it is for planners, engineers or whatever, we will certainly offer bursary opportunities.

Mr KOTSIRAS — How do you advise schools or students about these scholarships?

Cr KNIGHT — Good question. I am assuming that in the course of events the schools will be notified through their careers teachers, but I will check that.

Mr DIXON — What does the presence of a university do for a town like Mildura? How could you quantify it and compare it to, say, a similar town of a similar size that has not got a university? What are the differences between those two towns?

Cr KNIGHT — I guess part of it is the CSIRO example, that if you take out a university or a research institute or a whatever, you are in fact taking out some of the leadership of a community. I am not trying to be judgemental about it, but it clearly does erode a skill set that a community can ill afford to lose. But what is absolutely vital in places like Mildura is the first step up. It may be that it is the opportunity to test the water. For kids in country areas, further education requiring relocation means that you are stepping out of secondary school into tertiary, you are stepping out of home into independent living, and you are stepping out of a town you know into a place that you do not know. We are burdening these kids with all these challenges at one time.

I relish the fact that we have TAFE and university facilities where people can complete their degrees or certificates or diplomas. But equally it may be that in some cases they may go and do a first or a second year locally, adjust to tertiary education, adjust to semi-independent living, and then maybe make the transfer to somewhere else to pursue a specialty that obviously they might not be able to do locally.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Can I add on to that: do you think that students see a regional university campus as second class, and that therefore a lot of students wish to go to Melbourne or to Adelaide to undertake a course?

Cr KNIGHT — I think there are some fashion statements around that. That is a challenge for the universities who are seeking to operate in regional areas. I think our students and our communities need a reality check on some of that. I am a graduate social worker; no-one ever asked me where I did the degree. The notion that we are typecast by our institution, I think, stops after Harvard and Yale. But we do have to jump a bit of a cultural cringe about, 'Well, maybe it's not as good', because I think we can evidence that in many cases the education is

better. Monash is represented here today; that is a specialist training opportunity for regional doctors. I spent several years interviewing students for John Flynn scholarships at Monash. They clamored for those opportunities. Why? Because they get much better medical training in the regional areas than they do if they are based at a city hospital. It is up to the universities to identify what all the better opportunities are and market them.

The CHAIR — Lastly, I take you to back to your starting point with the graph. Community aspiration and support for people seems to be very successful here in Ouyen and a couple of other communities in this region but not for others. What are you taking from that that you think might be able to be applied in some of those other communities to address that general community aspiration issue?

Cr KNIGHT — One of the things you would have heard about in Robinvale with Chances for Children is the fact that that program runs with a mentor system. That mentoring is particularly important for kids who are making the major adjustment from secondary to tertiary.

But that is people who cannot only be of assistance in terms of academic endeavour, but can also be inspirational and interested, and then all of us, I think, respond to interest. If someone is interested in what we are doing, all of a sudden we sit up a little bit taller, and I think we have to somehow manufacture some of those opportunities for some of those kids who will not have that uplift in the normal course of events.

The CHAIR — Thanks. That is terrific. Thank you for your contribution. I think we might move on then now to Northern Mallee LLEN. Thank you very much for that contribution.

Witness withdrew.

CORRECTED VERSION

EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

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

Ouyen — 3 June 2008

Members

Mr M. Dixon	Mr S. Herbert
Mr N. Elasmar	Mr G. Howard
Mr P. Hall	Mr N. Kotsiras
Dr A. Harkness	

Chair: Mr G. Howard

Deputy Chair: Mr N. Kotsiras

Staff

Executive Officer: Ms K. Ellingford
Research Officers: Ms C. Whiteman and Ms J. Hope
Administrative Officer: Ms N. Tyler

Witnesses

Mr G. Simpson, chair, and

Mr G. Stone, interim executive officer, Northern Mallee LLEN.

The CHAIR — Welcome. Thank you for coming along to add some more of your input into this inquiry, Garry and George. I do not know who is going to start off.

Mr SIMPSON — I will kick off. Thank you very much for the opportunity to come to speak to the committee. We are here representing the Northern Mallee Local Learning and Employment Network (LLEN). During the day I am the chief executive of a group training company, an RTO and largest employer of apprentices and trainees in north-west Victoria. George Stone is the interim executive officer of the Northern Mallee LLEN. Our previous executive officer recently resigned to move back to Melbourne, and George, who has had a long and distinguished 30-something years in the TAFE system, was kind enough — —

Mr STONE — It is not that long.

Mr SIMPSON — Not that long but it probably felt like that long. George has been good enough to pick up our interim EO's position. We have a paper that we have circulated and that we would invite you to have a bit of a look at. We do not propose to go through it chapter and verse. We are aware of the time factor. You have to get up to Mildura to catch a plane but there are some statistics at the back of that report that probably show an interesting picture. But we will give you a bit of an overview.

I will not go into what the LLEN is about because I am sure you have already spoken to other LLENs. Suffice it to say that the Northern Mallee LLEN, based up in Mildura, covers an area that is covered by the Mildura Rural City Council, including Ouyen, Murrayville, Werrimull and some other places that you may not have heard about. In essence we are a geographically-remote area. If you take Mildura out of it, we are in an area of geographic remoteness. Our LLEN area picks up about 15 per cent of the size of Victoria and we are certainly in an area that is getting whacked by the drought and the impact that has had on the local community as well.

That is a bit of an overview of where we are with the LLEN. George will just cover a little bit on the university courses that are delivered up in Mildura and some of the impact.

Mr STONE — Thanks, Garry. What we plan to do very quickly — and I will keep an eye on the clock for you — is to give you an overview of the university courses conducted in Mildura. La Trobe may have given you an in-depth analysis of that, but I think it is important, from the perspective of the LLEN and particularly with regard to the comments we have had from the careers coordinators at the schools in Mildura, to look at the importance of this university to the north-west of Victoria.

We will make some comments about scholarships, and particularly about the issue of how information in regard to scholarships is received by students and is received by parents. It seems to me that there are some really big blockages there in terms of that information flowing. We will talk briefly about transport issues. That was one of the topics that was put to us by Karen, so we have picked up some information about transport issues, particularly the problems for students in regions like Robinvale and Ouyen travelling backwards and forwards to Mildura or elsewhere. But also within Mildura itself there are some critical issues in terms of transport to and from the university and the TAFE institute.

We will very quickly go through the data that came out of a substantial survey of students who completed school in 2007, and the data there shows some of the critical issues that are barriers to going on to further education. The analysis looks at students who have moved forward into tertiary and higher education, and there is also an analysis of students who have not, and you can look at the different factors that have contributed to the decision-making of those people. We have a series of recommendations that Garry will put very strongly to you and there is some data behind that.

If I move on and perhaps quickly summarise: La Trobe University in Mildura is quite critical. If you look at the list of courses that are conducted there from a starting point of probably six years or thereabouts ago, La Trobe has really sunk substantial resources into the Mildura campus.

The faculty of health sciences, shown there, conducts nursing degrees, social work and an honours degree as well. Law and management conducts business, commerce and accounting programs. The faculty of education conducts a bachelor of education and a graduate diploma on a cycle of every two or three years or thereabouts.

The importance of this particular university is that students who have to leave the district come up against social, financial, family, aspirational and also geographic impediments that restrict them from moving outside the region.

To have that local presence is absolutely critical to a substantial number of students. If you look at some of the data that came to us from the Mildura Senior College, the two most favoured organisations in terms of their students who leave year 12 are the La Trobe campus at Mildura and also the Sunraysia Institute of TAFE. They are the two most popular places, and the issues there revolve around those barriers that you have probably heard about day after day in terms of regional students leaving the district.

Melbourne, as an entrance point into university, is relatively low. In fact it is lower than Adelaide. I think one point that this committee might need to consider or certainly take on board is that in the north-west of Victoria the two key places where students are going to university study are locally at the La Trobe campus or TAFE if they are doing a diploma or advanced diploma program, and also South Australia. The collective universities there take up more of the students from this region than those heading off to Melbourne.

In looking at the issue of scholarships, I think the point to be made there is there is a multitude of scholarships. They come from all sources in the health and allied health industries. There are dentistry scholarships, there are medical scholarships and there is a whole range of scholarships in those areas. But in talking to two or three of the careers coordinators, there does not appear to be a coordinated approach where you can say to a parent, here are the scholarships that this particular person going into that career could actually access. It seems to be various agencies having scholarships but certainly no coordinated approach. The cross-border issue, Victoria versus South Australia, also creates complexities.

Universities in South Australia are very proactive. They provide really clear pathways. The careers teachers have the advice, and the career teachers link the students to those scholarships and the parents to that scholarship information very, very readily, whereas overall it appears to be somewhat disjointed.

Mr SIMPSON — The South Australian model certainly is more efficient than the one we have here in Victoria. The South Australian Tertiary Admissions Centre has a lot of information linking people straight into scholarships. There is a bit more of a coordinated approach over that side of the border than what we have here in Victoria.

Mr STONE — I will turn very briefly to the transport issues. There is a substantial number of issues within Mildura but also for students travelling from outside areas. For example, there are no viable bus routes from Ouyen to Mildura on a daily basis, or Robinvale for that matter. This means that students studying in Mildura and living in Ouyen effectively have to make the same decision about leaving home as they do going to Melbourne, Adelaide, Sydney or wherever the case may be. That is a pretty big jump given that they are still going to be studying locally. I think there are some issues there.

Within the township of Mildura, there are ongoing issues there with the timetables of the various tertiary institutions and the bus lines not lining up. What the bus lines try to do is run commercial timetables, that do not fit with the university and the TAFE timetables. As a result, students miss out. What they end up doing is having to buy a car or borrow a car, whatever the case may be. In fact one careers coordinator cited examples of students driving around unlicensed to ensure that they got to their lectures and got to their various arrangements at the university rather than miss out. There are some pretty dangerous practices out there being undertaken by students if that is occurring.

In relation to the On Track data, I am not going to go through this in any detail. We tabled the papers for your consideration but there are just a couple of highlights. This particular research is a Victorian government initiative and it is designed to pick up data about year 10 to year 12 government and non-government school students. We have concentrated particularly on the year 12 data in this report for students who leave school and go into education, training or elsewhere.

The program was launched in 2003, so there is a fairly substantial range of data being built up over a period of time. Just to highlight some of the information out of the research undertaken through the Northern Mallee LLEN, there were 473 young people interviewed, who completed the surveys associated with this data, and who had completed year 12. There were 153 early leavers — students who had left school prior to year 12 — and that data showed some pretty interesting comparisons between statewide figures and this particular region.

To quickly run through them, the university enrolments from students in this region are substantially lower than the state average — 39 per cent from this cohort compared to 47 per cent statewide. So there is a pretty substantial gap there to be made up and I guess that is part of the reason why you are here today. In terms of students going on to

TAFE and VET programs, the figure is 9.7 per cent in this region compared with a statewide average of 19 per cent, so the uptake of TAFE, VET programs is substantially lower as well.

Apprenticeships — 14 per cent in the region compared to 8 per cent Victoria-wide. So more students are picking up apprenticeships and traineeships in this particular region. In terms of deferrals, they are much higher here, for the sorts of reasons that people have been talking about — the need to defer, financial reasons, Vern spoke about Centrelink and the issues there, are basically have double the deferrals in this region compared with the state average.

I do not want to go through each of those statistics step by step, by I think there is some really important and interesting data there that the committee would need to take into account. For those who have not gone on to further study, the five critical issues are, firstly, aspirations — the actual aspiration to want to go on seems to be a major factor, and you can see the statistics to back that up; and also financial considerations again come to the fore here. Travel is one we alluded to previously, the social and financial issues of leaving home are important, and the fifth one is the actual availability of post-secondary training in the area where they can easily find themselves studying compared to the difficulties of moving home and all the other issues that occur from that.

So employment is critical, and also the presence of the university in Mildura are two of the key factors there. I will leave the data there for you to peruse at your leisure, and Gary will talk briefly about some recommendations. Again we were asked to consider recommendations that you might take back to Parliament, and Garry will run through those and then we will take some questions.

Mr SIMPSON — Thanks, George. They are on page 8 of the submission, and there is a set of recommendations that the Northern Mallee LLEN has put together from our stakeholders that we would like the committee to consider. There is a lower participation rate in higher education by students from the north-west area of Victoria compared to the west of Victoria. That is completely clear in the statistics. Secondly, there is a need to identify key barriers preventing increased participation of regional students in higher education.

Thirdly, there is a need for some targeted assistance and/or support programs to reduce these barriers that are faced by secondary students who wish to engage in higher education within and outside of the region.

Fourthly, a review is required into the current availability and format of information for potential higher education students on topics such as scholarships, transport arrangements, financial assistance and the like.

Fifth, further policy development and implementation is required to address the issues causing the lower participation rate in higher education in regional Victoria. Sixth, there is a need for additional undergraduate degree level courses in the north-west region of the state. There is some information included in the paper on that, including the science, ICT and engineering areas. Finally, additional financial support targeted to remote and rural students is necessary.

Mr STONE — So there is the wish list from the stakeholders.

The CHAIR — There are some good sound points there.

Mr STONE — If you do not ask, you do not get!

Mr DIXON — We have heard about the skills needs in the area, and they are changing. How are all the training institute and training groups, your schools — and obviously that is part of the LLEN's job to meet those, to react to the needs of the community and make sure those gaps are being filled — how effectively is that happening and where are the gaps?

Mr SIMPSON — As far as the skilling is concerned I think it is being done quite effectively. The statistics we have provided, and just talking apprenticeships and traineeships, show that it is not quite double the state average up in the northern Mallee area as far as year 12 completers going into apprenticeships and traineeships. But one of the reasons for that and one of the benefits of being in a small community is that we are able to bring a lot of the stakeholders and punters around the table together, and we do find — and I think it is probably a little different to the Melbourne experience — that in regional areas we tend to get a more coordinated approach from the local punters and the service providers because we are all in it together in a drought-affected area.

Because of the size of our community, being small, we do come across the same key players quite regularly so we are able to generate a more coordinated approach and market it more strongly within the school system. That has worked pretty well, for a small regional area, as far as promoting things like apprenticeships and traineeships and pathways into higher education. That is done pretty well, but it is done within the resources of the service providers themselves.

Even as far as scholarships and other opportunities go, Vernon Knight referred to Chances for Children. That is not government funded. That is fundraising. In my normal day job, my organisation chips in a few grand to that each year. Other organisations chip in a few grand also, so the community is all about chipping in to try and address some of these issues here and keep the uptake in the schools going.

Mr DIXON — Where are the current gaps at the moment, then?

Mr SIMPSON — Agriculture has been struggling a little bit, and the water rights has got a lot to do with that. With the water entitlements up there, I think the blockies get about 22 per cent or 23 per cent. That is their current water right. They are not going anywhere in a hurry. It is a real squeeze on those businesses, and that is a pretty big industry up in the Mildura region.

Even with apprenticeships and traineeships in those industries, we have seen a decline and that has a flow-on effect. With industries like engineering, people that build the plant and equipment that goes out on the vineyards to harvest grapes and things like that, they have had a slow-down as well because the blockies are selling off their land up there and going into early retirement and if they can sell off their land or sell off their water rights, they will. So it does have a flow-on effect into other industries like engineering.

Then that even has a flow-on into retail. The retail sector up in Mildura has certainly decreased. We do not have the tourism that we used to have either. That is not happening because the tourist attractions, with the effect of the drought — people just are not interested in coming into a drought-affected area for tourism. So that is a big challenge for Mildura tourism; but a lot of industries are having a flow-on effect.

Mr HERBERT — Thank you very much for your submission, I was pleased to see that you reiterate what we have heard many times — the importance of La Trobe University and their higher education provision here in this area. Your submission notes that there are gaps in local student demand. Science, health science, information technology and engineering have been identified, in terms of tertiary education, I suppose, by local school careers coordinators as gaps in the offerings of tertiary studies. Do you have any information about perhaps a better analysis of industries' needs, about where the gaps are?

Mr STONE — No, we do not.

Mr HERBERT — Are they perceived gaps or real gaps in terms of the needs for additional higher education courses?

Mr STONE — I think the information does not relate to the needs of local industry. I think the careers coordinators that I spoke to were talking from the perspective of, they have students in their schools who get the appropriate entry into Melbourne University or whatever the case may be to study some of those programs because they cannot study them locally.

If those courses were brought on board, they believe that, over a period of time, there would be adequate numbers to run those courses; but substantially it would be, apart from the few who might get jobs locally, about students finishing their courses and then going to work in other regions.

Mr HERBERT — So that is student demand rather than industry demand?

MR STONE — Yes, it is demand by students, not by industry.

Mr HERBERT — Thank you very much. That is good.

Mr KOTSIRAS — How effective has the LLEN been in improving the education outcomes for students in this region? The second part is: how would you measure this? The third part is: is there anything you require the Victorian government to provide to the LLEN to ensure more positive outcomes for this region?

Mr SIMPSON — It has been quite effective in increasing the outcomes for students to go into some ongoing employment or further education. Our membership requirements are no different from those of any other LLEN. We have key stakeholders, including the group training companies, registered training organisations, schools, employers and apprenticeship centres. We have all these people around the table on a monthly basis. We are able to work together and come up with partnerships and innovative ideas to keep fostering that pathway for people into either ongoing education or some form of employment. What was the second part?

Mr KOTSIRAS — The third part is: do you require any other assistance from the government to assist you in your job?

Mr STONE — One project we are working on at the moment is the referral hub. I have been in the job for two weeks and this particular project really excites me. I think it has substantial merit. It is a project that is initiated through the Mildura Rural City Council and the focus will be that an information base will be created that covers all the various agencies, universities and welfare and health organisations that are associated with a student going from secondary school into post-secondary. So rather than having to go to 14 different shops to get one piece of information, it will all be in the one centre.

That is a project that still has a lot of legs to be turned for it to get to fruition. If there is a project that you are looking to try to run as a pilot across the state, a project like that, with some support from the Victorian government, would be well worth investing money in. If you can get it organised in the next three months, I will have it up and running for you.

Mr KOTSIRAS — You are working very closely with the schools in the area?

Mr SIMPSON — Absolutely.

Mr STONE — We have substantial representation from all the key stakeholders, and they are all as excited. Having sat in the chair for the two weeks, I think that is the most exciting project that the LLEN should be grabbing — and grappling with, because it is going to be a huge grapple to make it work. That is the one that needs the work put into it.

Mr SIMPSON — One other project that the LLEN wants to get its teeth into is a school-based apprenticeship coordinator. With the way the system currently works, there are competitive interests of apprenticeship centres, group training companies and training providers. They are all acting separately from each other in their own little way to try to get school-based apprentices on the uptake. We are not finding that that has been particularly efficient up there. The most efficient it ever was, was about three years ago, when the government actually gave some funding to provide a school-based apprenticeship coordinator to act as a central cog for all the various stakeholders and providers in that system.

That is something that the Northern Mallee LLEN is going to put in a submission to DIIRD on and hopefully get some funding to get a school-based apprenticeship coordinator up in Mildura to coordinate all the different organisations so that there is a common approach between and with all the schools.

Mr ELASMAR — A quick one on the scholarship, which has come to my mind now. Are parents aware of the scholarship?

Mr STONE — I do not think they are, no. I think they are not aware of it without being in contact with the careers counsellors. Careers counsellors are critical to the whole process and the comments from the careers counsellors is that the information is not readily available even in the professional networks that they work in. They are finding out about new things all the time. Sometimes the students find them and come and say, ‘Are you aware there’s scholarship X, Y and Z?’, so that becomes part of the portfolio. But it is very ad hoc and it is made more difficult because students from the north-west travel all across Australia for education and a large number end up in South Australia, certainly more than in Melbourne. So there is a need for some coordinated approach.

Mr SIMPSON — We keep getting told that the South Australian approach is a best practice model, as far as sharing information in relation to scholarships is concerned. They have a really good, coordinated approach is what we keep getting told by the career counsellors up here.

Mr HERBERT — What is the indigenous population here, in the Ouyen area?

Mr STONE — Minimal.

Mr SIMPSON — It is very small down here.

The CHAIR — The population is more centred around the Murray River area?

Mr STONE — Yes, it is — Mildura, Robinvale, Swan Hill.

The CHAIR — That is interesting. Thank you, Garry and George. That is very useful.

Witnesses withdrew.

CORRECTED VERSION

EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

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

Ouyen — 3 June 2008

Members

Mr M. Dixon	Mr S. Herbert
Mr N. Elasmar	Mr G. Howard
Mr P. Hall	Mr N. Kotsiras
Dr A. Harkness	

Chair: Mr G. Howard

Deputy Chair: Mr N. Kotsiras

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Executive Officer: Ms K. Ellingford
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Witness

Dr J. Russell, director, Mildura Regional Clinical School.

The CHAIR — Welcome, John.

Dr RUSSELL — I am John Russell. I am the director of the Mildura Regional Clinical School. I am not making a submission. I have been asked to just come to share some information with you about what we are actually doing up there. I have a whole range of statistics. I am sure we have all been reading from the same book, so I am not going to bore you with all those statistics about barriers and solutions, because I think you have probably heard them several times over, except to say that the cost for a rural student to go to the big city is about twice the cost of an urban student going to university, so it \$20 000 to \$10 000, and that is a huge barrier.

The rural clinical schools project started in 2001. It was a federal government initiative designed to run medical training in rural areas, basically in the hope that it would attract medical practitioners back to the bush. As you are well aware, we have a huge rural workforce problem. Considerable funding went into the setting up of the infrastructure. In Victoria we were blessed with the Department of Human Services, which matched the federal government funding, which did not happen in any other state, so we ended up with excellent facilities in Victoria.

There are four nodes in the rural clinical schools in Monash and they are at Mildura, Bendigo, Traralgon and Bairnsdale. I will come to the extended rural cohort. At the moment students in their third year will go to one of those sites for their entire year. That is their first clinical year. The first years of a medical course are basic sciences and social sciences and that is all done in Melbourne. Every student who gets into medicine at Monash has to do their first two years in Melbourne, and there is no way around that. Then they go to clinical medicine which may be in a city or rural hospital. At the moment students are able to spend all of third year in a rural hospital at one of those four sites.

In fourth year they can also choose to spend the entire year at one site, if they wish. In final year we actually encourage them to go back to the big city to look at big city medicine because I think we all recognise that if your entire training is in rural then your education medically might be a bit narrow.

The CHAIR — Just to clarify that, they would not be in the same place in the third and fourth years, but they could do two rural placements at different sites?

Dr RUSSELL — We have had students who have chosen to stay in Mildura for two years, so that is possible — at the moment. That will be changing, as I will explain in a moment.

There is always that concern about going rural and not doing so well. La Trobe I am sure suffers from that as well. The academic performance of students in rural is as good as if not slightly better than in the urban hospitals, which we do not spread too widely because they would not be very happy about that because I think they were expecting us to fail. I think that success is built on the fact that they get a lot more clinical experience, they see the common illnesses rather than the esoteric and they get a lot more personal care. So we have no trouble recruiting students to rural. In fact often we have to have a selection process because we are oversubscribed.

Accommodation perhaps may be a factor. Initially it might have been, because it is free in rural at the moment. I say 'at the moment' because that is about to change. So the idea of having free accommodation for a year is attractive to some, but I hope that people come because of the standard of excellence of our education.

There is currently some research going on as to the impact of the rural clinical schools project. I do not actually understand why because the first graduates from the rural clinical schools are only in their second year out, so it is impossible to decide whether there has been any impact.

Certainly lots of our students come back and do rotations during their first and second years, and we have had some who have actually taken jobs for the entire year. There is one at Mildura and there is one in Bendigo. Certainly if they stay for a long time, they develop a sense of that community and that town, but it is too early to say whether we have had an impact. Of course the federal government is very interested because it has put in a lot of money. This is a very expensive option. I think the initial grant was about \$20 million, and I think we have just had another grant of another \$20 million, so it is not cheap.

We now have the Extended Rural Cohort starting. The first intake for that was two years ago, so at the end of this year they will be moving into clinical medicine. What is the Extended Rural Cohort? It is an extra 60 places that the federal government funded. It is for setting up a rural clinical school collaboration between old enemies — Monash

and Melbourne universities — right across northern Victoria. It extends from Mildura to Bendigo to Castlemaine, Swan Hill, Shepparton, Echuca and Wangaratta. It is right across that corridor.

The Extended Rural Cohort students spend two and a half years of their three clinical years in a rural placement. They might spend two and a half years in Mildura, or they might spend two and a half years in Bendigo, or they might swap between sites. Pulling together the two curricula has been an interesting and challenging exercise, and at this stage I think the two universities will keep themselves to themselves, but there may be opportunities in the future for students to go to sites that are run by other universities.

Once again the idea is that longevity seems to be the key. Half of Mildura's GPs are guys who came up here about 20 years ago, did a one-year intern year and never left. Longevity seems to be a key hook, if you like, to get people to stay. These students will be spending two and a half years of their three years — the last six months once again they are being sent to Melbourne to have a look at big-city medicine, and I think that is a really important part of their education. Otherwise it might be a bit too narrow.

Getting into medicine is hard. We have 12 applicants for every spot. It is a very difficult process. You have to sit the UMAT, which you may be aware of. It is the undergraduate medicine and health sciences admission test which is a sort of psych test. I am not sure what that tells us. Students get a bonus point or two on their ENTER score if they are rural — that is, RRMA 3 to 7 if you understand the RRMA classification — so basically outside Melbourne and Geelong.

At Monash they are interviewed. Melbourne does not interview, and if you have not got an ENTER score of about 99.5 it is probably not worth applying. It has very high targets. Monash is different, and I would support its system. We interview 800 students — so it is a huge undertaking to interview them for the course — but we will have kids in medicine with TERs of 92 even; we have had kids who have got through on that sort of score. I think that is healthy. I do not think you need to be a boffin to do medicine. We like to see kids with some interpersonal skills which we think is very important. So the system is slightly different. I think Monash offers more opportunities for kids who are not quite in the boffin range.

The other thing about the ERC is that we are specifically targeting students from northern Victoria, so in the ERC area from Mildura to Wangaratta. We are looking to recruit from that area primarily, and last year 27 per cent of the intake was students from that area. It does not alter the selection criteria but we specifically target that area. If we do not get students from that area then we look at students from rural Victoria, and then the third pot we look at is students from rural Australia, and the last one we look at is students from urban. I am not sure how keen I am about this because there are lots of kids in rural who would love to go and live in the city and stay there, and equally there are a whole bunch of kids who would love to come out to rural and stay there. I am not sure whether that is particularly clever thinking.

There is a lot of angst in Monash at the moment from some students who have realised that they are in the Monash course which they joined because they wanted to go rural. They find that if they are not in this ERC cohort they cannot go rural. I am not sure we have got that completely sorted out, and we are looking at ways that we can offer opportunities for urban students to learn in rural, because if they want to be out there and they are the people we want out there, not people who have been sent because they are in a particular cohort.

I will not go through the barriers and solutions. I think we have done that to death. There quite a lot of scholarships around. There is the Medical Rural Bonded Scholarships, which you can apply for when you apply for medicine. It pays \$23 200 a year to the student, so that is quite attractive particularly for kids where finance is a big issue, and like everybody has said that is a huge issue for any rural kid. I think it cost me \$70 000 to get my child through a course, and that is just typical. Somehow you find it. Perhaps I am more fortunate than others. The thing about those is that effectively you are signing away about 15 years of your life at the age of 17.

I always advise kids to take advice about it and to think about it very carefully, because you will get your \$23 000 a year and you will be one of the richest students, but you have to pay back six years in an area of workforce shortage. It is most likely to be rural; it could be outer metropolitan, but if you take up neurosurgery it could be in Brisbane. It is an area of workforce shortage; that is where you are sent. You get a certain amount of choice about where you go. You do your course and job training and then you to six years in an area of workforce shortage. You are picking a long way down the track and if you have married a corporate lawyer or something it could cause all sorts of issues.

They also offer Bonded Medical Places. These are for kids who do not quite get in, and it is a bit of a bribe really. It is, 'We will let you do medicine if you sign up for six years in an area of workforce shortage, but we are not going to give you any money for it'. Once again you have to think very carefully about that, but some kids are just so desperate to do medicine that they will do anything and they will sign on the dotted line. What it means that at one-quarter of any year of Australian students are bonded; 25 per cent of the year is bonded.

Monash has a policy of 25 per cent intake, so 25 per cent of any year at Monash are rurally-based students, and there is a definition for that; you have to have spent five of the last 12 years in a RRMA 3 to 7 town. Monash has a view on taking rural students because we know they are much more likely to go back to a rural area than other students.

The RAMUS scholarship is another one which pays them \$10 000 a year and it is non-bonded, so that is quite a popular one. That is given out by the National Rural Health Alliance and there are 550 scholarship holders. Their requirements are not much; students just need to join the rural health club at university and have a rural doctor as a mentor. I have three RAMUS scholars that I look after. Then there are a whole bunch of different scholarships that I do not think I really need to detail. I have a list of them here if anybody is interested in a bit of light reading. I think you have also heard about Chances for Children, which is just a fantastic thing. I think Steve Bracks's wife took it up in Geelong; she set up something similar — —

Mr KOTSIRAS — It was going to start but I do not think it got off the ground.

Dr RUSSELL — It did not get off the ground. I see it as a community taking responsibility for their kids. It has been incredibly popular, and they have raised a huge amount of money and supported some of these kids. We have a boy from Balranald who graduated in medicine at the end of last year. He was supported through his course by Chances for Children. It just a fantastic thing. I am surprised it has not gone further because everyone seems so keen to do it. It is about a community embracing education as a really important thing. That is why a presence at La Trobe is so important. All we offer now is medicine.

We did actually offer nursing but that is closing down. But we still have a nursing course in Mildura, and that is really important. Some kids really do not have an opportunity. They can only go to what is offered locally simply because of economics.

The only other thing I would like to say is that youth allowance is an issue. It is the same if you are rural or urban. We all know that rural students need so much more. It is not tested on where you live, and I think it should be, to reflect the greater costs that rural students have. Then, as they say, if you earn money, it comes off your youth allowance, if you get over a certain threshold, so it is almost like a poverty trap to students.

I really think that needs to be looked at, because it is a huge issue. Students are deferring in their droves. Most of them are deferring so they can earn enough money to get the youth allowance, because there is not even an opportunity for them to go until they have done that. Mind you, as I say tongue-in-cheek, universities should be illegal before the age of 21, because I see so many kids waste their first degree. They blow their HECS and all that money on a degree they are never going to use. Then they get to about 21 or 22 and then they decide what they want to do. But that will never get up. Thank you very much.

Mr HERBERT — Thank you very much. Can I just be clear; how long has the regional clinical school been operating?

Dr RUSSELL — Since 2000.

Mr HERBERT — How many students have you had go through in total numbers?

Dr RUSSELL — In Mildura we have got 22 students at any one time. It is going up to 30 next year with the ERC. They are there for the whole year, but the kids are rotating. In final year they come for six-week quotations. In fourth year they might stay 9, 18 or 36 weeks. The third year — —

Mr HERBERT — How many do you get each year in medical; five, six, is that how it works?

Dr RUSSELL — Sorry?

Mr HERBERT — How many new students are there in the intake each year?

Dr RUSSELL — When we start the year in Mildura there will be eight students in third year, and they will spend the whole year with us. There will be 10 students in year 4, but they rotate. So there will always be 10 students, but they will not be the same ones; and in final year up to 6.

Mr HERBERT — And nursing?

Dr RUSSELL — Nursing was around 15. Mildura was never going to be able to sustain two nursing schools long term, so Monash has pulled out and will finish at the end of next year.

Mr HERBERT — With indigenous health such an issue, there are, as you would be aware, very few indigenous doctors in Victoria. I listened to you talk about your selection process. Has there been any effort done in terms of trying to get some indigenous students into your clinical schools, and have you had any successes?

Dr RUSSELL — Yes, in both nursing and medicine Monash has specific spots for indigenous students, because we know that indigenous people are much more likely to respond to indigenous health-care workers. We had a graduate two years ago who was an indigenous student.

Mr HERBERT — Medicine or nursing?

Dr RUSSELL — Medicine. But you have got to be careful about this sort of thing. I think you must not set them up to fail.

Mr HERBERT — Yes, I understand; I guess my point being that whilst we have heard a lot about any rural student wanting support, but in their communities it is particularly important for indigenous students too.

Dr RUSSELL — We are well aware of that.

Mr HERBERT — So to get through medicine, if you can stay in your community, this sort of scheme would probably be very beneficial.

Dr RUSSELL — Yes, Monash has a university department of rural and indigenous health, which is based in Moe, but the professor is often up here, and we are looking very much at the Footprints program and how we can get more indigenous students into medicine and nursing.

Mr DIXON — I suppose it has nothing to do with the inquiry, but what are the key aspects of rural medicine; how is it different from city medicine, I suppose?

Dr RUSSELL — From city medicine? I would quote the work of White in the early 60s who said, ‘Why are we teaching medical students in tertiary institutions in the big city when those people represent one in every 700 presentations to a doctor?’. That is true. So you end up with a student doing their surgical term in a neurosurgery ward when you learn so much more — what we are trying to do now is not do that but teach them the basics. We beat our breasts about rural because they will join a general medical team or a general surgical team. They will see all the really common stuff. If you want to go off and do neurosurgery later, that is fine, but what we are trying to do is produce a safe, capable intern, and we are going to do that in seeing and treating all the common staff rather than the esoteric. That would be our defence.

The CHAIR — You mentioned earlier on, John, the free accommodation that is provided, and then you said that there are some changes, but you did not go into them?

Dr RUSSELL — Thank you for picking me up on that. Because they are going to be in Mildura, say, for two and a half years we think it is reasonable that they get a nominal charge, and it is going to be about \$50 a week — nothing like in Melbourne. The reason that it is free at the moment is it is identifying that they might have a place in Melbourne that they have to keep going. So they have it free in rural when they are having their placement; otherwise they have got to keep two places going. If they are coming to Mildura for two and a half years, we think it is reasonable that they pay a rent, which will be subsidised and be about \$50 a week.

The CHAIR — Where is this accommodation? You have got a unit of accommodation somewhere, have you?

Dr RUSSELL — We have a unit onside, but we tend to use that for the final-year students, the six-week rotations. It is a 10-bed unit, and they will live in it together. But we rent houses in the community. We think the best place for them to have their rural experience is to live in a house, learn to live with each other, cook, deal with the neighbours, and that is what they do. We have got about half a dozen houses in Mildura that we rent, and they live in those. That works very well. It is just another way of getting them to mixing with the community.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much, John.

Witness withdrew.

CORRECTED VERSION

EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

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

Ouyen — 3 June 2008

Members

Mr M. Dixon	Mr S. Herbert
Mr N. Elasmar	Mr G. Howard
Mr P. Hall	Mr N. Kotsiras
Dr A. Harkness	

Chair: Mr G. Howard

Deputy Chair: Mr N. Kotsiras

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Witnesses

Ms H. Thiele, principal, Murrayville Community College, and

Ms P. Nunan, principal, Werrimull P-12 School.

The CHAIR — The committee welcomes Ms Hilary Thiele, the principal of Murrayville Community College, and Ms Patricia Nunan from Werrimull P–12 School. Thank you for coming along. Obviously we understand that you have a lot to share with our inquiry in terms of your observations of your students' challenges in attempting to go on to tertiary education, or your challenges in trying to persuade them that that is a real option they should consider.

Ms THIELE — Thank you for inviting us. We are assuming you want to hear from us because we are really at the coalface of rural education?

The CHAIR — That is right.

Ms NUNAN — I would also like to thank you, because I have only been at my school for eight weeks, and this has given me a very good opportunity to interview and talk to a lot of people. I have spoken to a lot of students and parents about their aspirations and about the wheres and wherefores and all those type of things, so I now have a much better understanding of the community. I came to the school with preconceived ideas from another rural remote area, and I am finding that my present community is quite different from that. Hilary and I actually have a lot in common, do we not?

Ms THIELE — Yes.

Ms NUNAN — We are both prep to 12 colleges, and we are both from clearly identified communities. Probably what struck us most was something that one of our parents said. She said that city children are much better prepared and just had to take a small step to tertiary education; however, the transition for the country student is not a skip but a bloody long jump. We looked into that.

Ms THIELE — The issues that have come up are probably not going to sound like anything new in a lot of ways. The thing that stood out to us when we started to think about it deeply was that one of the big issues that kids in rural schools have is a connection issue — a connection to what is going on in the city. The other big issue, of course, is financial; that is probably the one that is the least surprising. We will talk about that in a minute. What we felt about the connection issue is that there is a lack of connection when you are living in a tiny little town to what is out there. The challenge is that when you go away to university you have got to go into a culture that is totally different from what you are used to. I believe that if you asked a city kid to spend the three years after they left secondary education in the country, they would not be able to do it either. It is just a cultural thing, but the thing that is being asked of rural kids is that huge jump into a totally different culture. It is the connection issue that we felt was probably the biggest one. It is a connection issue with regard to what is out there and what is their place in it. There is a fear of competition — 'If I find out that there are actually kids out there who are better than me, what am I going to do? I just will not be able to deal with it'.

There is a lack of diversity in the peer group, and that is getting worse. There is a lack of richness in the contribution of ideas. There is probably little peer and parental understanding that education is the key. Do you want to say something about that?

Ms NUNAN — The peer group is often quite small. Instead of having the option of being able to travel away with a friend, they may be the only one actually attending that institution or even going on to tertiary education. I have two students in year 12 this year, one of whom has come back to school after attempting a tertiary TAFE course in Mildura last year, because it just did not suit him. He did not feel at home there. The other young man will go on to university, but he will have to do it by himself. That actually requires a lot more determination on their part. They are leaving a community that is really close-knit. They do everything as a family. If one goes to an 18th birthday party, the whole family goes; if one goes to a 75th, the whole family goes. They all go to sport together. Sport plays a huge part in their lives. They are accepted by everybody in the community. Everybody knows them and they know everybody else, and everybody is interested in everybody else's business, so they really feel that they belong in that.

They are taken out of that situation to a city life that they are not really prepared for. Parents have not only gone everywhere with them, but they have protected them and they have monitored who they associate with. There are no drugs and there is no excessive drinking of alcohol in our community. As a principal, it is unbelievable what I have found in this school. However, that arouses extreme fears in the parents. The parents have a fear that their students are very socially naive. On the one hand they associate with everybody from babies to grandparents really well — there are no intergenerational problems at all — however, the parents have a fear of drugs and alcohol, that

they are going off to the bad, evil world and they can no longer protect their children. They see their children as being socially naive, and it is the social transition that concerns them.

We also found in our studies that there were gender issues. The students who have dropped out of school have tended to be boys. They have dropped out not to become labourers but to go on and do apprenticeships. The girls, however, have not done that. My girls who are remaining at the school — I have five in year 11 and one boy — and this is before we move on to the financial, really upset me. They told me they would love to go on to further studies but then one said, 'Why even apply? Even if we got the position, we would not be able to go'. When I am confronted with five bright young ladies saying that to me, I find that quite distressing.

The boys are expected to go back on to the farm, quite often, and the girls are often thought of to go on to university, but the financial problems kick in. We did, however, find there was a difference. In my community the families where the students come from city mothers — or outside mothers who have been educated — and farming dads are more inclined to encourage their children to go on to further education and vary their experiences. We found that there was that division.

Ms THIELE — That is an example of the diversity of culture, having come in a generation ago, but it is still about diversity of culture, which is I think an incredibly important thing.

Ms NUNAN — One parent said to me that when they were sending their son away to university they were chastised quite heavily by a lot of the local male farmers because they considered that a waste. You did not need a university education to be a farmer. They could not see the links between them. We have been at meetings this morning where we were told the most significant factor in a student's choice or pathway was actually their parents' influence. Taking that into consideration, this is something that really needs teasing out.

Ms THIELE — Getting on to the financial side of things — some of this will be no surprise — I will just attempt to unpack some of the financial issues a little bit more, because I think some of these problems can be addressed. One of the things that kids obviously need when they go to university, and when they go away to university, is money to set themselves up. The tradition at the moment is you take a gap year so that you will get youth allowance — we know a lot of kids who have done that — and then you go away. You still need to get a job. You still cannot survive unless you have a job. Having a job requires transport. It obviously requires credentials in the local area — and you are not known in that area so you have to prove that you are fit to do the job — but it also requires transport. I am aware of the fact that quite a lot of the time public transport is not that good around universities. Kids might be in residential accommodation and they have to go to a job somewhere and they cannot, because they cannot afford a car and the public transport is pretty bad. I believe that could be addressed, particularly the public transport issue, with a rural student agenda in mind.

The costs of running a car are prohibitive. Obviously with petrol going up and up — I do not know how you address this — but could there be such a thing as petrol vouchers for country students? That is just an idea to throw into it. But the costs of transport for kids is one of those prohibitive things. Just the fact that the gap year becomes mandatory is also an issue financially, because that is the way a lot kids address it, but that turns back into a cultural issue in terms of kids getting too comfortable if they stay in their local area. There is many a kid who forms a relationship locally and then does not want to leave the boyfriend or the girlfriend so they then do not take up the position that they have deferred. That is probably no news to anyone, but that is an experience that we have struck.

Ms NUNAN — I have found that. I just moved to Werrimull and my trips home are 8 hours driving or the horrendous cost of flying. I am really aware of just how much it would cost our students. I found with the financial aspect that my students are quite prepared to work, and they would relish being able to get part-time work so that they then could save and contribute to the costs of going on to the next stage.

However, where we live there are no part-time jobs, so they do not have that option to work. Because they do not have that, they are also not building up that experience or that résumé so that when they do go to the city they can present as students who have got that experience. As a school, we now have to try and look what we can do. As the one and only shop that supplied school lunches has closed, we are thinking that perhaps as a school we may have to set up some enterprising education and perhaps get them to make school lunches for our students. We do not know how that is going to go with policies and tax and child exploitation and everything else.

Mr DIXON — Go for it.

Ms NUNAN — And they will have to do their food handlers certificates, but at least that may be a way of building up a résumé for them, and perhaps giving them some money to contribute to their costs as well.

Ms THIELE — Getting back to the issue of diversity of culture, how do you inject that into a small community? Obviously it is quite difficult, but I believe one way is finding incentives to attract good teachers to country areas. At the moment there are not enough. Murrayville is lucky enough to have teacher housing — I know Werrimull has got teacher housing as well. Keeping the standard of the housing up is obviously an ongoing issue, but being able to say to good teachers, ‘We have got the houses for you’, that is fantastic. We have got that, but there need to be other incentives. Obviously the state government has recently upped the amount of money being offered to graduates, which is fantastic, because that is who we will need to attract in a few years time. We have got some excellent teachers now, but they are going to leave. Finding incentives to attract good teachers is a crucial thing, because it is that injection of culture. Getting those teachers to stay is another issue. Finding ways of creating a culture around them is problematic.

I still believe that there are things that can happen for teachers. I am wondering if there is a way of mandating to teachers that you have got to do your stint in the country. That actually happened when I first started on a studentship, many years ago when I started my teaching. You effectively had to do a stint in the country before you could pick up a job in a city school. Maybe that idea could be a thing that could be teased out. It is really important to have good teachers in country schools.

Ms NUNAN — We are also faced with the idea of professional development for our teachers. They too suffer from the tyranny of distance. Werrimull is the furthest school from Melbourne. We are actually very conscious of the fact that to have professional development out of our school is a time and monetary cost. My teachers are really keen, but I sometimes think they are still in the last century. It is not because they want to be there, it is just that they have never been exposed to anything else. That is a challenge for me.

Ms THIELE — More reliable ICT in schools that puts kids out there in the big, wide world. When it is reliable, when people can actually use it and know it is going to always work in every class, you will have teachers using videoconferencing a lot more than they do now. It has tended to go by the board because of its unreliability. That does need to be attended to, too. I suppose I am talking about on this occasion making greater subject options available, but also enriching the culture — putting kids in touch with other kids in classrooms across the country and not just in their own school.

We also had a thought about city mentors, didn’t we?

Ms NUNAN — There were quite a few — —

Ms THIELE — We are getting a little bit creative now. We are up to the creative stage.

Ms NUNAN — I was just blown away by what some of the students said to me. Talking about cultural diversity, it is not just the parents that we need to be working on, it is also our students. Their concern was the financial burden that it would impose on their families. Sometimes the restrictions were coming not from the families but from the students themselves. They see their parents working long hours.

As I drove in at 6.30 this morning those tractors were already out in the paddock under huge lights. They know the hours their parents put in. They know how tough it is for them at the moment, and they feel that they contribute a lot to handling the responsibilities on a farm. If they go away, that means their parents do not have their help either. It is not only the financial burdens, it is also that they have this really quite deep dedication and appreciation of what their parents are doing, and so that sometimes stops them. Most of them feel their parents would encourage them to continue, so the students themselves need to get over that. Students did not express to me a fear of going away. That came a lot more from the parents. One of the fathers was really afraid that if his son went away he would not come back to the farm. That was another real issue as well.

MS THIELE — Immersion in the big, wide world is a frightening thing.

MS NUNAN — Yes, and when they saw that they could make money out there and that it is a lot easier than slogging 24/7 on a farm, they thought that they would lose them. The students were totally involved, however. Because they were living in a community, perhaps accommodation that had a sense of community about it and that perhaps even included a pet, and that was set up in a housing situation, as in Deakin down in Melbourne, may be

more attractive for a country student. However, one person who had gone away was put into residence. She hated it; she felt very lonely. She moved to boarding with a family and found that that was absolutely great; the woman became like a second mum to her. She still visits her 15 years later. That was quite interesting too, that the type of accommodation being offered was important.

We spoke about financial assistance for accommodation and travel. We thought about not just taking students down to Melbourne, because they go down there to do work experience, but perhaps even getting parents down there because it is the parents who seem to have the most fear, and having mentors and support people in the city, trying to link up our student with somebody down there, either an older student or somebody in the area that they were studying or somebody from the university. That would really support those students to fit in, if they had somebody they could go to for that help if they were getting stuck.

There is also the introduction to city sports clubs. Our students find a lot of their identity through their sport. If they could then blend in and have some sort of connection down in the city, that would also support them.

There could be a strengthening of communication links with home, perhaps with the eradication of black spots in our telecommunications. I have got a mobile phone with me today, and I can use it when I am not in Werrimull. If I am in my flat I have to have it stuck into an aerial on the roof; we are in a black spot. They do not feel that they have easy communication with their parents.

MS THIELE — Probably an issue connected with that is the fact that Murrayville is supposed to be part of the Mildura network and is supposed to link to Mildura in all kinds of ways — it is part of the Mildura council — but Murrayville does not get Mildura television; it can only get Imparja from Alice Springs and it can only get the ABC from South Australia. There is a lack of connection to Victoria, which is quite strange, really. That is another issue. It is to do with technology.

MS NUNAN — Even Skype-type link-ups; apparently that is really cheap communication, so if we could encourage that, that would be good. The only other thing is just perhaps a few quotes from parents. If a young person wants to go away, it makes it hard on everyone. The students are totally involved with the family — they contribute to the day-to-day running of the farm and home, shop, socialise, play sport, eat together around a table every night and so forth. It is a very different culture to the one that I left behind down in the south-west. The parents and students have to adjust emotionally; the children develop a dedication to their parents as they know how hard they work. There are the financial costs, the naiveté about social skills. The country students were more often practical and therefore liked to work with their hands, making a university education not as attractive. But we found that those types often went on to do an apprenticeship.

I think that is about all. There is just one story I would like to tell. I was talking to one mum and she had to move to a neighbouring city for study during the week when she was in years 11 and 12. She was teased consistently by her accountancy teacher for being a sook. However, the teacher went out to Werrimull one weekend — she travelled only into Mildura. He went out to Werrimull one weekend to the football ball with one of his friends, and she was appalled when she saw this teacher who gave her such a rough time walk into the hall. However, on the Monday that teacher apologised to her, as he had had such a fantastic time and fully appreciated the community spirit and atmosphere that she had been missing. That is the story she gave me when trying to tell me what these kids were giving up when they moved away. They really had to be very determined, they had to feel supported, and they had to feel linked and connected to where it was that they were going.

Ms THIELE — It is that thing about valuing what is in the country. We are sort of talking in a model here of, 'Why aren't country kids going to the city to do a university education?'. But there is that idea of city people having to value what is in the country. Then I think that, in turn, rural kids will feel that it is a bit reciprocal. That is probably what that is about. That is probably all from us. Is there anything that anyone wants to ask us?

Mr KOTSIRAS — Do any of you have careers teachers at school?

Ms THIELE — We have at my school, yes. She is currently — —

Mr KOTSIRAS — A point 5?

Ms THIELE — No, she gets about a three session time allowance, hardly any time. It is just that we cannot afford to give any more time than that.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Have you found her to be useful in helping students?

Ms THIELE — Very, very useful, yes. She is currently on a careers teachers scholarship, and that is obviously enhancing her knowledge. It is fantastic that she was able to access that. But time is a major issue for her, and finding a creative way around finding time for her is a major problem in a small school.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Patricia?

Ms NUNAN — Yes, and we also have the managed individual pathways from year 9. The teacher we currently have has taken over the role this year because the teacher who had been doing it infinitum has gone on long service leave. That person had everything up in her head because she had been doing it for so many years, so our new teacher has been on a very steep learning curve. Because our teachers are still adjusting to the Victorian essential learning outcomes and standards — they have returned from leave themselves — and we do not have VCAL or VET in the school, I can see areas where we could get the students in our school out of their environment a little bit more, but on the other hand we do not have the staff or the time to do it, because our staff teach from prep to year 12 and we are spread quite thinly. They already have a number of different year levels and subject loads. One of my year 11 teachers is teaching five different VCE subjects, so to then get them familiar with a VCAL or VET outcome as well is making it really problematic at this stage.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Hilary, you said before that you like to see first years coming out to the country teaching. Would you not prefer to have some teachers with experience who have been there for a number of years?

Ms THIELE — Would love to have them, and we have got quite a few of them at the moment, but they are not going to last. Look, if we can attract people who are experienced, absolutely, yes. It is just that there is the potential for young people — they have got a big career ahead of them; presumably they will stay in teaching if it is an attractive possibility — and they might stay. We might get young people who will stay. But, look, anyone who is a good teacher I am only too happy to have at my school.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Finally, just a quick one. Are all teachers teaching subjects that they are qualified in?

Ms THIELE — Pretty much. I have one PE teacher who is a very enthusiastic PE teacher but he is not actually qualified in that area. I think we are very lucky, actually.

Ms NUNAN — No. In fact I had horror last week when I discovered that one of my teachers was not really confident in the subjects she was teaching. So now I have enrolled the student in distance education and she will become his tutor.

But with young teachers it is a matter of encouraging them. We do need to have young teachers in, otherwise we are on very strict budgets. If we do not have the balance between our experienced teachers and our young teachers, we cannot operate the school properly. Then we have the challenge of trying to engage our young teachers — to develop them and have them not only become part of our community, and my two young teachers are playing football and netball for Werrimull and they have blended in beautifully and are really accepted; and we will keep them, but I also need to develop their leadership. One really wants to become a country principal and the other one wants to also become a leader within our school.

So I am challenged now to provide that support for those people to give them the incentive to stay with me because I can provide some sort of progress for them. That is what I am working on at the moment: trying to get a research scholarship for Kate so that she can then travel with the country education project to Canada and bring back ideas on how we can improve our prep-12 school in concept.

The CHAIR — Marvellous.

Mr DIXON — Patricia, how many children at your school?

Ms NUNAN — Seventy-seven.

Mr DIXON — To both of you: you mentioned distance ed in terms of one student. Have you got other students doing distance ed., and can you tell me how they are going and how you find it?

Ms THIELE — Yes, I will talk about our experience with distance ed. It tends to not work that well at the top level of the school. Whenever we offer a distance ed subject we have kids really struggling — I suppose ostensibly it is with the workload and getting things in on time, but really I think it is more about the relationship they have with their teacher. There is nothing wrong with the teacher. It is just that it is a long-distance relationship, and the demands that that teacher appears to be putting on them, they just do not want to meet because they have not got that day-to-day contact.

However, distance ed has worked very well with our kids further down the school, with an IT program and with a philosophy program that we ran last year as part of our gifted extension program. I think it might depend on the student. But, yes, it has been problematic at VCE level.

Ms NUNAN — It has been problematic at school. In fact when I had this horror last week I said, ‘That’s it! He is going into distance ed and I want the teacher to be in there all the time with him as a tutor’. They said, ‘No, the parents and the student will not accept it. They only stayed here because he had a teacher, otherwise he would have moved into Mildura Secondary College’, which would have meant then huge expense for his family because they did not know how they were going to board him. Because he had done distance ed last year, he did not want to do distance ed this year.

However, I spoke to his mother about the option of this happening so that she could talk it over with the family, and because I am saying that the teacher will stay with him as a tutor, they have accepted it. Then there is somebody there they can talk it over with.

Ms THIELE — There is a relationship.

Ms NUNAN — Keep him on track, discuss the work with him. That is what they miss with the distance ed.

Ms THIELE — It is about relationships again, isn’t it?

Ms NUNAN — Yes.

Ms THIELE — A lot of it is about relationships.

Mr DIXON — So it can work if you have a tutor, another person and a third person, I suppose?

Ms THIELE — It can work. Yes, it can.

Ms NUNAN — Or even if there are a few people who are actually doing the course. When it is one student that is hard, Martin, but if you have a group of students doing it and then they can discuss it and work things through themselves, and you still have a teacher keeping an eye on that work going in punctually, then it is fine. But the kids really do like that interaction.

Ms THIELE — They do.

Mr DIXON — Thanks.

The CHAIR — It might be a bit difficult for you, Patricia, being new to Werrimull, but can I ask you to tell us about some of the success stories of students who have gone on to tertiary and what have been their experiences?

Ms THIELE — There are a lot of kids who have gone away to Adelaide from Murrayville because it is a lot closer than Melbourne. It is only 3 hours away. Over the years we have not had a lot of students right up there in the physios and the doctors. We have tended to have quite a few nurses in recent times. I have only been there since last year, by the way, so I am relatively new as well. I am just trying to think of who else has come home. We have had people going into teaching, which is fantastic, and funny enough that connection has been really good with Adelaide because the kids can come home on the weekends. If they go away to Melbourne, it is a major problem because it is just so far away.

Ms NUNAN — If they go to Adelaide from Werrimull, they can get as far as Renmark for \$50 on the Stateliner. If they come all the way through to Mildura on the Greyhound, it costs them \$150.

Ms THIELE — That is an anomaly, isn't it?

Ms NUNAN — So the parents need to go to Renmark to pick them up. Just picking up on that, I put out an invitation to my community when I knew I was going to be here to tell them what it was about and to ask them to give me some feedback. I said that the reasons perhaps ranged from the extra expense; students did not qualify for student allowances because of their father's assets, irrespective of drought; the distance from home, family, friends, animals, pets and the subsequent home sickness; and that students did not aspire to further education because there was not the role models et cetera in the family or community.

I was very quickly disabused about that because we have three physiotherapists in the area, we have a chiropractor, we have teachers, we have an accountant, we have a vet. What else do we have? I was told, 'Excuse me, that is not right'. They kept rattling off names. And I said, 'Excuse me, these are all women. Where are the men in this?'. That is what really struck me. We only had two men they talked about, the rest were all women who have gone away and done it.

Ms THIELE — They go back a long way, those stories, don't they?

Ms NUNAN — Yes, and they are really quite proud of these people who have gone away to university and have become these people. The three physios actually came from one family so obviously there was that influence. But as to the exact numbers, I am not sure. The women have PhDs; they have everything. It is fascinating.

Ms THIELE — Yes, I had a student from Murrayville. Somebody said to me the other day, 'She only went into teaching and she could have gone anywhere', and I was thinking, 'Okay — "Only went into teaching!"'

Ms NUNAN — But that could be because there is the role model.

The CHAIR — Thank you for that. You have painted a pretty helpful picture for us of some of the smaller country communities out there.

Ms NUNAN — They are very interesting.

Ms THIELE — Thank you for the opportunity.

Witnesses withdrew.

CORRECTED VERSION

EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

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

Ouyen — 3 June 2008

Members

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Witnesses

Mr M. Wilson, chair, and
Mr S. Vallance, Ouyen Inc; and
Ms S. Sly, parent, and
Ms D. Monaghan, parent.

The CHAIR — You have been listening for some time here, so it will be good to get your perspective, too. Welcome.

Ms SLY — I have taken a lot of notes from today actually. I am Sue Sly. I live 30 kilometres out of town, and I have three children: one is at high school at the moment; two girls have both been at university and one is there now. Both deferred. I thought, 'No, I do not have a lot to offer' until I came today and heard what was happening and it is just mind-boggling. If you can just bear with me because it is all in point form. I jumped on a computer and tried to make some sense of it.

I must admit it is all over the place. One of my biggest issues is Centrelink. Students come home for the holidays. They work over the summer break. They need to earn heaps of money because they need to be independent. Then, when it comes to going back to university, they need to apply for the commonwealth scholarships. They cannot get them because they do not have a health care card because they may have earned too much money over an eight-week period. It might be nine weeks where they have dropped off, but they miss out and they are penalised. We in the country do not get the same opportunities to work as city people do. We are greatly disadvantaged simply because, as opposed to somebody who is living in the city, we work in short blocks.

Students who live away from home over the summer also have the added expense of normal, everyday things. They come home for the holidays and go to Mildura to work but they still have normal, everyday expenses. Hence they are not making any real money. They could stay home and that would not cost anything. That is another issue: being able to qualify for rent assistance.

Scholarships, sadly from my perspective, are for either the very bright or the very poor. There are none, or very few, for the wage earner in the middle. Both my girls, as I have said, deferred. That was a question you asked the year 12s before. They both struggled in first semester because they found it hard getting back into study, writing essays and just that whole thing. But they have succeeded.

The CHAIR — In what sort of courses?

Ms SLY — Lynsey spent 12 months in Europe as a babysitter, or whatever they call those over there, and she came back and did nursing in Adelaide, a four-year double degree, and has so far excelled more than we ever expected. My second daughter is in her second year of university in Adelaide. She has one of the Mildura Shire scholarships and is doing town planning. She spent 12 months in Mildura, working earlier at the shire, so that made it even easier for her. I could not support either one of them, so they had to do something to do it.

On our school, I must admit I was on a very successful three-day trip to Melbourne on careers that Cheryl spoke on before. It is open to parents and students, and I could not recommend it highly enough. It is an opening for some students who may never ever get to Melbourne. It is encouragement for those who do not even want to go to university, because they can have a look and it is not so frightening. They also do a one-day trip to the Adelaide universities. It is the same thing, and parents and students of all ages are encouraged to go. Hence another expense. We are so isolated that we are always in the pocket.

Sadly, some students who work in the city part time and are no longer at uni have to pack up and come home over the holidays, so they have to bring it all home with them because they cannot leave things there. This is every year. Some of them have jobs in the city. They do not lose their job so they will actually drive to Melbourne, Ballarat, Bendigo, Adelaide or wherever, work that day, find a floor to sleep on and then turn around and come home. In essence they have made no money, but they cannot afford to lose the job, either.

It is sad for the ones who are working locally while they are still at school, that that cannot go towards their youth allowance. Youth allowance hits in after you have left school. It would be a great asset to be able to use that as a contributing factor. Students outside the immediate Ouyen area do not get the opportunity for part-time work anyway, because of travel constraints. Quite a few mums in the district work off-farm to offset the family debt. Therefore the kids miss out on government assistance there again. It does not help.

We have seasonal employment here, due to the harvest, and we will have many a uni student who will work 10, 12 or 14 hours a day. It is great money but it is for only four weeks and then they turn around and they are penalised. In some instances they have had to pay back their money to Centrelink because, they are told, 'You've earned too much'. There are no incentives.

Some drought-affected rural families — and there are quite a few around, really — are supporting three households. You have the main farm, and you have the kids who are away. They are sort of supporting them and trying to find extra money there.

On public transport, if we want our kids to come home for the weekend, it is really not viable. If they live interstate, they cannot get concessions anyway; they are just not there. For Victorian students who go to university in Adelaide, there are no travel concessions. That's about it; they are all issues from a mother's point of view.

The CHAIR — Thanks, Susan. But your girls have succeeded, despite all that.

Ms SLY — They have, but they have paid their own way. It did not have to come out of my pocket. It is a hard journey, and it makes it very awkward. I live for the day when I do not have to deal with Centrelink again. I will be on the pension by then, and I will be back having to deal with them. But I live for the day when I do not have to, because it is just so hard to comprehend what they are trying to portray to you and to get it across. It is very, very hard.

The CHAIR — Thank you for that. Let's go on to Ouyen Inc. Mark, you are leading off.

Mr VALLANCE — My apologies for being late; I have just been dealing with Minister Helper's advisers and they are running late, so it gives us a little breathing time.

Mr WILSON — We have a busy day, too.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Get used to it!

Mr WILSON — Coincidentally four of us are on the secondary college school council here in Ouyen and Steve is the president. We have just wound up together, as it happens. Sue comes from up the line, from 50 kilometres in one direction, and Di comes from down the line, about 30 or 40 kilometres in another direction. So you have a spread of recognition.

Welcome to Ouyen. I have a prepared statement from a collection of information. I will start with the obvious thing: what is Ouyen Inc? It is with pride that I have the opportunity to present to the inquiry on behalf of Ouyen Inc., which in turn seeks to represent the community of Ouyen in a positive manner. Ouyen Inc. is a volunteer community group that has worked for the social and economic advantage for the community of Ouyen during its 10-plus years of existence. Representation to local, state and federal government levels as well as business and industry have been undertaken by the successive annually elected committee which is made up of ordinary ratepayers wanting to do the best for the community of Ouyen.

Ouyen Inc. operates a portfolio structure with several subgroups and other reporting groups included in our monthly agenda. One of these reporting groups is titled 'Education'. Each month a report is submitted by our state school principals, keeping the community informed of developments.

The minutes of our meetings are circulated to an ever-increasing mailing list which importantly includes the Mildura Rural City Council. This provides a conduit of information about the activities of Ouyen Inc. and as a result another avenue for the schools of Ouyen to provide information to council about their activities.

On education in Ouyen, from the outset Ouyen Inc. wishes to recognise the excellent professionalism displayed by the education staff here in Ouyen. The excellent educational outcomes have also recently been evidenced in the Mildura Rural City Council's 2005 social indicators study and have been highlighted to the Ouyen community many times since the report was released. The dedication of the staff at both the primary and secondary schools is evident from the first day you become involved as a parent with children at the schools.

From a personal perspective for a moment, my wife and I moved from Melbourne to Ouyen 14 years ago with children aged three years and six months, and we started in business. Our oldest child started preschool and then later, primary school. In mid-1999 we sold the business and at that point we needed to make a decision about whether we moved on or stayed in Ouyen. Our decision was ultimately made on one important factor — that was, the education of our children. We were very comfortable with the education being offered in the primary sector, and we were also aware of the excellent reputation Ouyen Secondary College had established. So here we are and now my oldest son is in year 11 and the time is drawing near for him to make those decisions about his future and his direction.

As his parent I am aware of his efforts in researching his future path. While I sit here representing Ouyen today, it is obvious that my best reference and resource to have input into this process is my own experience with my son; however, the suggestions that I will offer towards the end of this presentation are a collection of information by informal discussions with various people from the community of Ouyen.

Considering higher education and/or university, I am self-employed as a partner in a local contracting and retail business, hence the dirty fingernails — I apologise for that! I have had contact with many apprentices over my 30 years in the trade and have seen some very intelligent apprentices along the way. I have often wondered why the more intelligent kids chose a trade other than going on to higher education or university. A trade is an honourable path in life, and it seems that we require more tradespeople constantly.

I see my own son at this point now where I feel he has the capacity to progress to a higher education level, which he still includes as a possibility, but he is now also seriously considering a trade. Time will tell which path he chooses, and we will obviously support the one he wants. The question really is how to make higher education more attractive. It seems that, when considering their future, young adults have many choices to consider — ‘Do I get a traineeship or an apprenticeship? How can I start earning money? Do I go to university and then wait four years or more to start earning money? Look at so-and-so. He started an apprenticeship 18 months ago, and he has now got a cool car. He has his mates, his cool house and a plasma TV’, which is very important.

Mr HERBERT — He is doing better than I am!

Mr WILSON — He is doing better than me, too, just quietly! ‘If I choose uni, then I am not even sure I will get the course I want because I have to wait until the end of year 12 for my score, and regardless of my score I will probably have to live away from home’ — in our case that is obviously great distances — ‘and I will not be able to come home easily on weekends. I will have no family there to support me. Where am I going to live? Who is going to cook and who is going to do the washing?’ They are important decisions.

To put this decision into further context, this agricultural-based community has been faced with the challenges of drought. Increasing costs of growing their produce, increased fuel costs — which, granted, are the same for all, but it is the distances that have to be covered which are the difference — all combine to reduce disposable income and the subsequent knock-on effects to the small business community and their employees, whose children are also looking at their own futures. These, combined with limited public transport options and the costs associated with living away from home, have a large impact on the decision process.

Equally, there are limited initial employment opportunities in smaller communities. I say initial employment opportunities, though they may present themselves later in a person’s career. Often the decision is weighted towards living away from home, but in the capacity of an apprentice or a trainee or in some other meaningful employment. Given all this, our isolated communities do well to have the participation rate they do in higher education.

I have a collection of suggestions for consideration I have received from various people within the community. Ouyen Inc. does not offer itself as any sort of authority, by the way. The following suggestions have been raised as possible points for the inquiry to consider.

Create or improve online learning opportunities where our children in remote and rural areas can stay where there would be no costs of moving away and the associated costs of living are maintained at family level while the child undertakes subjects associated with his or her chosen course in a safe environment. This could be supplemented with occasional week-block visits to the higher education provider, such as a trades apprenticeship does now. This would eliminate the need to find long-term lodgings and the obvious costs associated with that. The challenge here is to have access to high-speed broadband internet. It is particularly difficult if you are 45 kilometres away on the farm.

Ms MONAGHAN — It is not available.

Mr WILSON — Fifty kilometres away in Underbool, even with a small township, it is one of the major challenges. Another option is improved pathways for our rural and remote children who choose to go away to higher education at TAFE or uni or some other provider. Here in Ouyen we are fortunate to have a campus of the Sunraysia TAFE. Sunraysia TAFE, obviously located in Mildura, shares a site with the campus of La Trobe University. Streamlined linkages between our schools and TAFE and uni would provide improved pathways and

access for our children, helping to make higher education more attractive. Indeed in Ouyen's case we are on the doorstep of opportunity with the P-12 concept and the possible development of an educational precinct, which has the potential to create a seamless transition from VCE to TAFE or other higher education providers.

The next one is the expansion of the TAFE and uni facilities at local campuses. In the case of Ouyen, which services a broad region, being an economic hub, students could stay at home and utilise a combination of online learning in conjunction with an expanded town-based campus — that is, undertaking the online learning at the local campus. With an expansion of the Mildura-based campus of TAFE and of La Trobe, a wider range of courses could be made available, at least in the initial years of their chosen course.

I am particularly interested in the suggestion of developing a mode of professional training — I do not have any other snazzy word for it — which requires university training, but to also incorporate a host employer. For example, it would be a system similar to an apprenticeship, where a combination of on-job training and the required university training is recognised as another pathway to achieving their qualification. This pathway may take longer, but would give the professional trainee a sense of financial independence while undertaking their training and may eliminate the need for loans, which impact on people when they finish their degrees and are then required to pay off.

It also gives rise to host employers grooming their professional trainee to match their business, paying incremental wages as the professional trainee progresses and gives real day-to-day relevance on the relationship of training to the job for that particular professional trainee.

Another suggestion we have received is the development of a staged school system with respect to the VCE being conducted over two years a score system which allows for a portion of the score to be allocated in the first year, with balance allocated at the end of the second year. This may give students an indication of how they are performing and also give them an understanding of the effort required to achieve the score they require to match the future possible educational pathway.

As an extension to that, a modified score system for rural and remote students would improve access to areas of higher education. Equally, a modified score system would encourage students from city areas to come to regional campuses, thereby improving the numbers of students applying to our Mildura-based campuses, which would in turn help the TAFE and uni to expand and then in turn benefits our own children.

Finally, we suggest a system of tax incentives — or salary sacrifice, if you like — in relation to the HECS fees, or fee assistance for potential students in remote and rural areas may be a consideration.

In conclusion, the role models that our children adopt, whether we know who they are or not, have a strong influence on our children's direction, and I am sure a lot of what I have said you have heard time and again already today. All around are the people our children interact with on a daily basis. As a small community they will interact socially with tradespeople, farmers, teachers, doctors, nurses and small business people on a regular basis. Our children are influenced and imagine themselves as the person they see in their role model.

Being aware of this opens the door to mentoring, which is something I heard just recently. Developing a mentoring system is probably not feasible; however, making the community aware that they are all mentors and developing a streamlined system of information which we mentors can easily access will help us to advise our young adults.

I have not dwelled on the obvious, being the costs associated with rural and remote students, although the subject has come up. Going away to higher education facilities, families are impacted when their son or daughter leaves home. They are further impacted with the cost of living and the cost of education for that son or daughter. Development of alternative means of delivering higher education should be undertaken, recognising the pool of talent that is potentially available in rural and remote areas, but this development should not be done in isolation, as students from cities and large regional centres should also benefit from alternative delivery of higher education.

That is about it. I thank the committee for your time. Steve, do you want to add to that?

Mr VALLANCE — Apparently I do, Mark! Is this a payback from last night?

Mr WILSON — Thanks.

Mr VALLANCE — You have probably heard from the staff here at the secondary college, and your research will have shown, that we have a really strong ethos in this school about secondary education and the transition to tertiary education, and that is not by accident.

That is not by accident, that is by design over a period of time. The community, and that includes Ouyen Inc. but certainly outside Ouyen Inc. as well, is as supportive of education as any community, I think, that we can look at. Ouyen Inc. has worked pretty closely with the students at this school, as recently as last Friday with a futures forum, and that was both primary and secondary kids. They came here and talked about the future of this community, and their community social awareness and the awareness of social cohesion and the awareness of their expectations placed on them, not by others but by themselves, were absolutely extraordinary. They have such an acute awareness of their own expectations, and that is due to the ethos within the community, and that is not by accident.

There is probably an element of the burnt chop syndrome. You are probably aware of the burnt chop syndrome where people will eat the burnt chops essentially, will suffer themselves in order to give their kids the best possibility. We are in the process of doing that. Di and Sue are in the process of doing that. There are no second chances with your kids' education, so if we have got to live skinny for a couple of years, people will do that, and they will continue to do that regardless of what the outcome is.

It would be a lot easier if it did not need to be that way and particularly in light of the economic climate in which we find ourselves. It does not matter whether you are agriculturally based or an owner support service and support business in Ouyen; the impact is significant on your ability to maintain and support your kids throughout their education. I do not think there would be anyone here in Ouyen who would like to see their kids miss out on that opportunity. The opportunity needs to be given, and the kids need to be supported through that.

I agree with your Centrelink comments. What a nightmare that is. Anyway, that is not your issue, but maybe it should be. It is not just the challenge that our kids face going through the transition from year 12 to tertiary education. If you are one of us sitting here and want to undertake tertiary education to top up your skill set, the costs are absolutely exorbitant. My course fees are \$8000 a year. The cost of me travelling and staying in Melbourne is more than that. It is \$15 000–\$20 000 a year. I do not do that because my kids need to do it, so therefore my career path within the state government is hamstrung because of that.

But the ethos that is provided by the community and by the education community in this community is strong around education, and it is not just education. We had some people from Swinburne University work with the community in March, and they spoke at length in their feedback about the connect in this community between education, health and agriculture. They are not seen as different things, they are the same thing. I think that is a reason for the success of our kids, or the relative success of our kids and of our community. From an Ouyen Inc. point of view, again, thanks for coming up.

The CHAIR — Thanks, Steve.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Can I ask how do you perceive or how do parents look upon La Trobe campus in Mildura? Is it seen as equal to the campus in Melbourne or is it seen as a second-rate campus because it is out here offering a limited number of courses?

Ms MONAGHAN — It depends what course your child is after of course, but my daughter's second preference was actually Mildura. She did not see it as a second-rate chance to have a good education at all. She had it in there as her second preference because it was closer to home and it was going to be easier for all of us.

Mr VALLANCE — Yes, certainly I do not think it is seen as second-rate. The opportunities are limited, and I think that is the challenge that it faces. There is not the breadth of opportunity there.

Mr WILSON — That comes back to one of the suggestions that Ouyen Inc. has put, and that is to make it more attractive for city-based and large regional centres to consider Mildura, therefore increasing or potentially increasing the student numbers that are applying to the Mildura La Trobe campus. If they have got increasing numbers, they have got a reason to expand, that effectively helps our children in these rural areas.

The CHAIR — You have talked, Mark, about the option of having an opportunity, whether it be here in Ouyen or somewhere close by, of doing more IT-based or link-up-type opportunities, although we have also heard

that a lot of students who try and do that find that it is not very satisfactory. But it is something that clearly needs to be explored in greater detail to see whether there are examples of it working in places but getting that combination of blocks of study outside perhaps and so on. It is something we certainly have had raised and clearly is one of those opportunities in looking at what can be provided regionally.

Mr WILSON — The challenge being the internet access to the farm gate. Obviously that is an ongoing issue and almost bigger than this inquiry, isn't it.

Mr VALLANCE — It certainly is.

Mr HERBERT — Thank you very much. We have heard a fair bit today about young people's fear of moving out et cetera, which is a bit different to my experience. I wanted to get out as quick as I could and went to uni, and it was the same for my son. He was 20, he was keen to get out in the big, wild world himself and get a job and study — difficult, but to make his own way. Do you think there is some benefit in your children going out there and learning, for example, to do the washing and learning to do things?

Ms MONAGHAN — Definitely.

Mr HERBERT — Is there another side of the story that perhaps we have not heard, that if it could be made a bit easier for them, is it a worthwhile experience or not?

Mr VALLANCE — There are two answers to that question. One is around education, one is around leaving home, and they could be totally different things. Leaving home for education is a cost on the family and community; leaving home, whether they are going to work or not, there is less of an impact. If you are paying for your course fees and your living away from home and your whatever, the cost there is exorbitant. If you are paying your kid's car insurance because they are working as a plumber in Melbourne, there is a difference in their ability — not in their ability to experience the world but a difference in the amount of support that is required to do each of those two things. It is exorbitant.

Mr HERBERT — Yet, just on that point — I will not dwell on it — but getting a university education is more than just the academic studies.

Mr VALLANCE — Absolutely.

Mr HERBERT — If they learn how to — as we heard a bit before — live in a group house, cook and look after themselves, there are values in that.

Mr VALLANCE — Exceptional values. The social aspect of that is enormous, but who pays for it? Here it is the parents, because of the factors we face around capital gains and assets and things like that. So it is the parents who are paying for that as a student rather than paying for it as a plumber. They are different. Yes, the experience and the support of the college here, to get kids from here to Melbourne to experience a whole range of different aspects, is very solid and has been for a number of years. The cost of doing so as a student or the cost of doing so as a worker are different.

Ms SLY — Another comment I would like to make is when my second daughter deferred, she worked in Mildura for 12 months, so it really was not a big concern for me because she was earning an income; she was self-supportive. She is in Adelaide this year — last year — and she is on youth allowance. The money is not quite as readily available, therefore she is suffering. I question: do we send them to university to learn or to work? Why are they there? How many of them have part-time jobs to keep food on the table, to pay the rent?

Mr HERBERT — Most do, it is true.

Ms SLY — And they are missing out on study. What is the relevance in that?

The CHAIR — That is right. It is a challenge.

Ms SLY — It is. I ultimately would prefer that they were not working throughout the year. I would rather they came home in the summer or went wherever and earnt megabucks, but then they are penalised.

The CHAIR — Yes, we understand that point.

Ms SLY — Yes, but who solves it? Nobody.

The CHAIR — Just in completing where we are, of course the process for us from here on is that we will be doing a few more hearings over the next few months in regard to this inquiry. We do have another inquiry in teacher professional learning that we are doing at the same time, and we will be completing that one at the end of this year. This inquiry will be completed by the end of June next year, so we will be compiling in more detail a report in the first half of next year, and it will obviously be released publicly by the middle of next year.

Obviously there will be a range of recommendations directly relating to state government, but also there will be lots of other recommendations in terms of federal government funding and a range of federal government issues, as well as recommendations that may relate to tertiary institutions but also for local schools and local communities in terms of things we have picked up that they might be able to consider doing to help improve the opportunities for young people going on to tertiary education.

Obviously next year we will be looking over the research we have done and attempting to put together all of these appointments so that they will be clear and concise and can be taken on, perhaps, by state and federal governments as well as others. So that is the process from here. That brings to an end our hearings for today.

Mr WILSON — Just before you do, our good friend Di, who is here, has something that she wants to read out.

Ms MONAGHAN — No, it is alright. They have actually just about stolen my thunder. I am trying to get something done about the travel concession for our Victorian home-based children to attend university in South Australia, who have to pay full fare to come home. Is there some blanket concession that can be given for all of the country for remote travelling students to be able to come home?

V/Line is the provider of the service that goes from here to Adelaide. If you are a Victorian student, you can travel under Victorian concession for as far as a 50 kilometre radius into the South Australian border. If you reside or attend school on either side of the state border, you can still use your Victorian student concession card. But if you go any further into the state, you cannot use a Victorian student concession card and you are forced to pay full fare.

The CHAIR — That is fair comment.

Mr DIXON — You cannot use a South Australian one? You cannot, I assume, because you are not a South Australian resident?

Ms MONAGHAN — That is right, because you are not South Australian. But you are not considered a Victorian any more either, so what do you do?

The CHAIR — Thankyou for that. We will take that on board, and I will declare the hearing at Ouyen Secondary College closed. I thank the college for hosting the committee today. It has been certainly very useful. Thank you to the school and to all of the other friends of the school community for contributions you have made and written submissions and the oral submissions. It certainly is helping to round out the research we are doing with regard to issues on the inquiry. Thank you all.

Committee adjourned.