Inquiry into Geographical Differences in the Rate in which Victorian Students Participate in Higher Education

Online Submission

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In order to address the Key Research Questions, the following observations are submitted:

1) Are students from different geographic areas (eg regions, suburbs, or localities) in Victoria:
   - more or less likely to apply for university?
     If from rural areas they are less likely to apply due to
     i) higher costs for accomodation and basic living than those who can stay at home and study, ii) lower incomes, iii) requirement to move away from family and social supports, iv) recently improved job availability in rural areas, v) lack of competitive skills in workforce making these people more employable without qualifications.
   - more or less likely to receive or accept university offers?
     Less likely for the same reasons as above.
   - more or less likely to complete a university course once they enrol?
     Less likely for the same reasons as above.

2) Is this because students from different geographic areas:
   - stay at school for longer, or leave earlier?
     No
   - choose different subjects or courses at school?
     Yes, VCAL and VET are more attractive when the university options are too expensive and other career paths offer initially comparable remuneration.
   - choose different post-school pathways (eg TAFE, apprenticeships, or employment)?
     Yes
- have greater or fewer university campuses/courses available in their community?
There are far fewer courses available in the Wimmera than in metropolitan areas and this certainly contributes to the extra costs and social dislocation. It also means these students are later lost to the region because they have trained elsewhere and are then retained in that location. The evidence of retention of graduates in areas where they have trained shows this.

- are affected by other factors, such as economic, social or cultural issues?
Income is lower in the Wimmera, social factors are affected by declining populations trends.

3) What effect does going to university (or not) have on...

- students from different geographic areas in Victoria?
The Wimmera frequently loses these students. We need more courses at Horsham and far more distance education provision, especially delivered through workplaces.

- their families and communities?
The Wimmera has been built by entrepreneurs. The loss of these students and others sees our 18 - 40 cohort at record low levels and the very people who would have become the next entrepreneurs are lost to the community. Sporting clubs and volunteer groups cannot recruit and are more reliant on older age groups who cannot continue to provide all the necessary services. Low and middle income families can't afford to obtain tertiary education for their children and disadvantage flows from one generation to the next. This is creating disadvantaged communities.

- skills shortages and the Victorian economy?
Lack of rural university students is affecting available skills in the rural areas. Lack of entrepreneurs means the normal business creation is not occurring and rural economies are stagnating, especially in the small business area where the future enterprises originate.

- What could be done to address any barriers to university participation for students from different geographic areas?
A number of steps are needed including:
a) providing far more university places at regional centres.
b) much better and effective provision of distance education linked up with businesses.
c) concerted efforts to link local rural businesses and local rural young people (Hindmarsh Shire Council is focussing on this).
d) subsidised accommodation for rural students at tertiary institutions.
e) state government support for local cadetships for local students to enable their retention in the rural area after graduation, at least for the same length as the course (Hindmarsh Shire has introduced its own cadetships but this needs to be more widely available from other businesses). This enables
rural students to attain tertiary qualifications where this might not have previously been possible due to cost and also provides connection and first work experience in their home environment, leading to greater retention and strong positive social outcomes.