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ANHLC Submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry into Geographical Difference in the Rate in which Victorian Students Participate in Higher Education

Preamble
The Association of Neighbourhood Houses and Learning Centres appreciates the opportunity to respond to the Inquiry into Geographical Difference in the Rate in which Victorian Students Participate in Higher Education. ANHLC welcomes the Inquiry as much of the adult education and Learning work done in the NH&LC sector focuses on identifying and reducing barriers to education for adult learners. It is widely recognised in the sector that geographical location is one of a number of strong determining factors in educational outcomes.

The Association of Neighbourhood Houses and Learning Centres (ANHLC) is the peak body for Victoria’s 380 Neighbourhood Houses and Learning Centres (NHs&LCs).

The vision of the Association is of just and empowered local communities in which our member organisations provide opportunities for people’s participation and learning.

Neighbourhood Houses and Learning Centres provide a range of community support, adult education and learning activities, social support, community development & civic activities along with children’s services. Programs and activities are developed in response to the needs and concerns of the residents in the locality in which they are based.

Neighbourhood Houses and Learning Centres are community managed non-profit organisations. Houses & Centres are managed by voluntary committees and operated by part-time staff and volunteers. Although the majority receive some government funding, most Houses/Centres also rely on a mix of funding from community support, fundraising and fee-for-service programs in order to operate.
Response to Inquiry

Consideration of Adult Community Education (ACE) as one of the alternative post school pathways is essential in researching this vital issue. Unfortunately ACE does not appear to be mentioned in the terms of reference or the key research questions of the Inquiry. ANHLC urges the Inquiry to include specific reference to ACE.

Neighbourhood Houses and Learning Centres have been key providers of Adult and Community Education in Victoria since their inception in the early seventies. From the beginning, the Neighbourhood House movement has understood the importance of learning as a pathway to social and economic independence, particularly for those who face discrimination and disadvantage.

Currently there are approximately 380 Neighbourhood Houses and Learning Centres providing a range of learning opportunities to tens of thousands of Victorians annually, playing a critical role in delivering the social and economic benefits that ACE can bring to individuals and communities. This includes education and training spanning the learning spectrum from nationally accredited courses to Learning Engagement courses. According to the DPCD figures (2007) ninety-five Neighbourhood Houses (29%) do not receive ACFE funding. Sixty-nine out of 175 RTOs are Neighbourhood Houses. Of 379 ACFE funded organisations, 234 are Neighbourhood Houses (61%).

Since their beginning, Neighbourhood Houses and Learning Centres have used Learning Engagement courses as an easy access learning opportunity that creates the potential for further learning and development. These courses are targeted primarily at people who are disengaged from formal learning and employment, appealing to their interests and social needs. Whilst on the surface they can and have been perceived as hobby activities, they have provided a critical point of entry into further education and employment for thousands of Victorians.

Over a number of years there has been an increasing emphasis on VET provision in the ACE sector, particularly through ACFE funded courses. In turn there has been a reduction in the provision of affordable Learning Engagement courses that were previously part of the ACE landscape. This has occurred as Neighbourhood Houses and other ACE providers have been required to provide courses with a VET focus and more recently to provide accredited training, often under pressure from ACFE.

Learning Engagement courses play a critical role in opening up opportunities for further education training and other forms of community participation for members of the community for whom any form of participation posed a challenge. By providing the safe, accessible space through provision of these activities such people could make the transition from disengagement to an engagement loaded with developmental potential. This cohort includes but is not limited to: long term unemployed, immigrants and refugees, mothers who have been absent from the workforce, people with disabilities and mental illness, people with low educational attainments and victims of family violence.

There is at least one Neighbourhood House or Learning Centre in almost every town or suburb in Victoria. Adequately funded Learning Engagement courses in Neighbourhood Houses and Learning Centres could contribute significantly to combating barriers to participation in further education, especially geographical location, simply because of the geographical spread of these organisations.
Conclusion

In conclusion Neighbourhood Houses and Learning Centres are everywhere but they are underfunded. They have an enormous amount of experience in providing a range of learning pathways for people who face a variety of educational disadvantages to higher education, employment and social engagement. Adequately resourced Neighbourhood Houses and Learning Centres could contribute significantly to increasing the rates of participation in higher education, particularly for people facing geographical location related barriers.