Parliamentary Committee Inquiry into Geographical differences in participation rate in higher education

Context:

Bendigo Senior Secondary College (BSSC) has an annual enrolment of Year 11 and 12 students which varies between 1740 and 1800 from year to year. The entire student cohort falls into the post-compulsory years. Each year, approximately 1000 students undertake Year 11, and 800 students undertake Year 12. During the year, approximately 200 leave to employment, other training or sometimes unemployment prior to completing years 11 or 12. Between 200 and 300 students complete a VCAL certificate, and there are between 600 and 700 VET program enrolments. Bendigo is a regional city with both LaTrobe University and Bendigo Regional Institute of TAFE campuses available to students. While each of these tertiary institutions does not provide the range of courses to suit large numbers of students, there is less of a geographical barrier to BSSC students accessing a tertiary course compared with students living in more rural localities.

1. Variations in number and types of Uni applications, offers acceptance & completions

Data for BSSC for University VTAC offers and acceptances:

(Please note that the Universities and TAFEs do not provide completion data, so we are unable to comment on that). Note also that the total number of “Yr 12 students” (as defined by VTAC) – does not differentiate between VCE and VCAL, nor does it exclude 3 yr VCE/non completers/students withdrawn etc.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>VTAC Applicants</th>
<th>VTAC Offers</th>
<th>VTAC Acceptances</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>841</td>
<td>510 (60.6%)</td>
<td>83.33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>783</td>
<td>495 (63.2%)</td>
<td>87.27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>864</td>
<td>461 (53.35%)</td>
<td>81.56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>816</td>
<td>434 (53.18%)</td>
<td>82.94%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

No of applicants with VTAC preferences / applications

510 (60.6%) 495 (63.2%) 461 (53.35%) 434 (53.18%)

Percentage of students with offers through VTAC

83.33% 87.27% 81.56% 82.94%

Percentage of students who have enrolled (acceptances) in Tertiary Education.

57% 62% 57% Not avail.yet*

Percentage of students deferring

13.64 23.61 30.05 Not avail.yet*

*Data for 2007 available in June 2008

If we were to compare the above with the growth in VCAL we might assume that, as VCAL has a more vocational focus, this could account, to a degree, for the percentage change of VTAC applicants (ie approximately a 10% reduction from 2004 – 7) However, it is more likely that other factors are influential on VTAC applications.

The most glaring statistic from those above is the percentage of students deferring.
Reasons for student deferrals:

- Clearly financial – the attractiveness of “independent student status” and the associated financial benefits (The associated Health Care Card alone makes this status extremely beneficial) – particularly for rural/isolated students
- The growth of Gap opportunities (and the awareness of them) and the ability to equate “volunteer work” in, say, a developing country – to Centrelink payments eligibility
- The introduction of Defence Forces Gap program – huge financial incentive – ie Army = $36,000 pa with no ongoing commitment!
- Cost of living ‘away from home’ has increased and capacity to pay (by families) impacted upon by financial factors such as increased interest rates, inflation, drought, employment etc.

Students who miss out on a University offer, or who cannot afford HECS, or to live away from home are often advised by our careers counsellors to consider a TAFE program as an alternative route to University.

2. Influences of school retention rates including enrolments & completions for VCAL, VCE & VETiS on higher education

While retention rates have increased, the range of vocational options available within schools to cater for these students and to lead them to further study has been compromised by the low level of funding for vocational education. If VET programs were more affordable there would be better VET / VCAL pathways to higher education than is currently provided.

For example:

A Year 11 BSSC student wishing to study Certificate III in Music Industry or Certificate II in Children’s Services as a pathway to higher AQF certificate levels and employment, must attend the local TAFE. BSSC should not and cannot duplicate the facilities/ expertise required to deliver these courses ourselves even though our College is an RTO. BSSC receives Student Resource Package funding of $900 per Year 11 student per subject for teacher salaries and materials. The College also receives a VET supplement of $330 per student for these two certificates, taking the total income per student for teachers and materials to $1250. The local TAFE charges a minimum of $1614 per student for tuition and use of their facilities. The Government expectation is that schools should fund VET programs for students from their SRP and VET supplements – without any contribution from parents, the School would make a loss of $400 per student. We have 65 Year 11 students in these two programs thus the College has to cross subsidise and ask parents to make up a shortfall of $26,000.

BSSC is in a large regional city – the example above is provided to illustrate the difficulty of retaining students into VET pathways, and thus giving them pathways to higher level certificates at BSSC with only one TAFE provider available. With no competition for the local TAFE, our College is unable to “bargain” for the price of program delivery. These costs pale into insignificance when compared with the difficulties and costs faced by more remote and smaller rural centres, where transportation costs to access a TAFE must be added to the tuition costs outlined above.

While the availability of VCAL is strengthening the pathway for exit students to TAFE and workplace options, we do not believe that is is drawing students away from university pathways. Students who typically undertake a VCAL certificate are students who may not previously have remained at school to complete Year 12 – Indeed, many would not have made a transition to BSSC from the Year 10 Colleges at all.
3. Influences of participation in other post-school pathways including TAFE enrolments, apprenticeships, employment

Media coverage and the government’s own performance measures for schools place higher value on academic pathways than vocational pathways. Despite this, many students view vocational pathways as the best option. An expansion in TAFE and other vocational options along with the increased relative cost of university education has influenced students’ preferences.

Bendigo Senior Secondary College takes up to 1000 enrolments from 5 Bendigo Year 7 – 10 Colleges each year. The Managed Individual Pathways team contacts all Year 10 students who do not enrol for Year 11. The following data related to calls made to those exit Year 10 students.

**2007 MIPs Retention Calls – 128 to students who did not make a transition from Year 10 to 11**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Description of Transition</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Enrolled at BSSC</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>Seeking Employment (and those with only pt/cas. employment)</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>Alternate Education (BRIT, relocated, RTO’s)</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>Uncontactable (lack of accurate contact details)</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Employed, Apprenticeship (Full time capacity)</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**2008 MIPs Retention Calls – 141 to students who did not make a transition from Year 10 to 11**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Description of Transition</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Enrolled at BSSC</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Seeking Employment (incl those with only part-time/casual employment)</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44</td>
<td>Alternate Education (BRIT, ATC, relocated, RTO’s)</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Uncontactable (lack of accurate contact details)</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37</td>
<td>Employed, Apprenticeship (Full time capacity)</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Another interesting statistic from 2007 obtained from following up students 6 months after they have left:

- 103 students left the College (during March to July) with an ‘unsustainable outcome’ (part time employment, unemployed) in 2007 -
  - Of those students, 62 remained with an ‘unsustainable outcome’ after 6 Months (+ a possible 25 who were uncontactable)
  - This could mean that the percentage is as great as 84% that will remain in an ‘unsustainable outcome’ if they are allowed to leave the education system prior to securing employment, further education, apprenticeships/traineeships!

The increasing numbers (between 2007 – 8 in the tables above) who chose alternate Education rather than staying at school shows that there is a growing need for more dedicated funding to support rural and regional schools in offering programs which flexibly integrate work, TAFE or Further Education training within a school program. The difficulty of accessing work opportunities and appropriate – eg Certificate 1 training from a TAFE, are partly geographical transportation issues.

Currently TAFE Certificate 1 courses are not funded in the VET supplementary funding provided to schools – the current funding supplement is only for Certificate II or III programs, and is weighted towards trades. While this weighting is understandable in terms of encouraging schools to provide VET programs which will help to address skills shortages and thus have good pathways for students, such funding appears to discriminate against VET programs typically selected by female students.
4. Potential geographic, economic, social, cultural & other influences on uni applications, offers, acceptances & completions

Research demonstrates that the most reliable single indicator of educational performance is the occupation of the family, which in turn relates closely to the socio economic circumstances of the family. Even if a student ‘rises above’ this challenge the financial barrier of university and living away from home for rural students looms as an impediment to further study.

It is hardly surprising in a climate where non government schools have experienced a financial windfall that they have increased their market share, sought to position themselves as the vehicle of choice for families wanting their children to access university and sucked many government schools dry of students with high level academic ability through scholarships and other incentives. This is certainly the case in Bendigo with BSSC the only government school for post compulsory students competing with three exceedingly well resourced Independent schools: Australian Technical College Bendigo, Girton Grammar School and Catholic College Bendigo.

The effect on those ‘left behind’ is evident in the lower rates of higher education participation from government schools including BSSC.

With the difficulty faced by regional, rural/isolated communities in attracting professionals (health professionals an example) – there is a distinct lack of:

- Work Experience opportunities in a range of professions
- Professional role models

Both of these have an impact on shaping ideas and aspirations of students/school leavers

It is very important that rural and regional schools are able to offer flexible curriculum options to enable students to “keep their options open” and to maximise the potential to move from vocational programs to University or tertiary TAFE aspirations as they become more aware of possibilities and their own capacities.

5. Advantages & disadvantages of participation & non participation in higher education for school leavers & their families:

Participation advantages

- Access to well paid and meaningful employment that provides a career structure (Career scope)
- Willingness to return to rural towns as professionals eg teachers / Doctors once qualified
- Can help build cohesive rural and regional communities
- Formal Qualifications are acquired
- Helps reduce poverty levels in rural areas

Participation Disadvantages:

- Affordability – cost of living away from home
- Localities – higher education providers not available locally in many rural areas
- Career Choice errors
- Students moving away from rural homes to metropolitan institutions may become at risk of homesickness, financial stress and then drop out altogether.
Non-participation advantages:

- Early exit to employment
- Financial savings
- Early commencement of apprenticeships and earning capacity.

Non participation Disadvantages:

- Career choice errors
- Career scope is limited
- Long term remuneration prospects are poorer
- Restricted social / self development
- Reduced capacity to keep bridges between locality groupings in the broader community

6. Potential effects of geographic barriers on skill shortages

- Remoteness – difficulty of attracting teachers & medical professionals & their families. Skilled people often avoid locating to rural areas as there are fewer opportunities for professional development and career advancement.
- Wages in rural areas are lower than in cities.
- Lack of access to cities and public transport for professionals relocating to regional, rural / remote communities
- Cultural diversity not as well supported in some rural / remote locations for immigrants who might be able to fill skill shortages.

7. Strategies to address any barriers contributing to geographic differences

- Many issues related to young rural students accessing “independent” youth allowance in order to financially survive relocation to metropolitan, even regional, locations for tertiary study
  
i. Need to earn approx $18000 - difficult to do that in rural locations
  
ii. Need to be out of school for 18 months
  
iii. Parent assets taken into account (farms etc can’t be partially sold to get funds / they are not liquid assets)
  
iv. Need to defer for at least a year in order to gain access to independent youth allowance. Under the current situation of deferring / working for a year or more, some students never return to take up tertiary training after being “independent”.

Independent youth allowance should be paid automatically to rural / regional students who need to live away from home to access higher education

- Scholarships / cadetships for rural students – especially in skill shortage areas – could have an obligation to work in rural areas after graduation for 2-3 years after graduation (but not as onerous as for Doctors!)
- Salary incentives to work in rural & regional areas
- Guaranteed and more generous funding for Universities operating campuses in regional / rural areas

Compiled by Pathways Manager, Rosalie Lake with input from: Dale Pearce, Principal; Meredith Fettling, Assistant Principal; Mark Zulian, Careers & Pathways Coordinator; Lorelle Pearse MIPS Coordinator, Jennifer Moloney VCAL Coordinator.