Education and Training Committee

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

Submission by the Bendigo Student Association, La Trobe University, Bendigo Campus

As the sole student body at La Trobe University Bendigo, the Bendigo Student Association (BSA) feels that it is only prudent for it to contribute to this inquiry into the geographic differences in the rate in which Victorian students participate in higher education. Indeed, the BSA welcomes the opportunity to contribute to such an important issue; because we feel this is now one of the most crucial and urgent issues facing regional Victorian students today.

It is our experience as the sole provider of non-academic services, including welfare, advocacy and representation services that geographic differences are a major impact on and determinant of educational attainment. With this in mind it is our intention to address these terms of references to the best of our ability, in order to provide informed anecdotal and where possible empirical evidence demonstrating the significance of geographic differences with regard to participation in tertiary education.

Terms of Reference:

a) Variations in the number and type of university applications, offers, acceptances and completions in different metropolitan, rural and regional areas

As the sole student body on the LTU Bendigo Campus we have observed what appears to be decreasing student numbers over the last few years. As we are not privy to La Trobe’s enrolment figures we cannot comment from absolute empirical evidence but we can comment on our own evidence with regard to student numbers active on campus. Going by our own sales of food and beverage in our student owned Café, it does appear to us that there are now fewer students than in the past, simply on our sales. But this is also backed up by a noticeable decline in students socialising in the Student union floor.
It is likely, of course, that these observed changes may also partially reflect the fact that financial constraints mean that many students actually forego at least some of their meals by necessity. It is also clear that many more students than previously need to work to support their studies, and this will often require that the time spent on campus is often limited to class attendance.

We have also heard that this year enrolments are down across many disciplines, especially humanities and social sciences, and IT, which has been in decline for several years now. It has been indicated that the overall campus enrolment is 96% of target, but there seems to be a significant variation in the levels achieved between Faculties and Disciplines.

La Trobe University statistics indicate that the attrition rate at its Bendigo Campus is not dissimilar to that at Bundoora (in fact, marginally lower), however the rate for other regional campuses of La Trobe is significantly higher. (La Trobe University Management Information Unit: 2007 Performance Indicators ST07.2 2007 Inverse Attrition by Assorted Categories)

A significant impact on attendance has arisen during the past several years of economic difficulty experienced by regional and particularly rural communities. There is certainly a higher rate of student deferral in recent years than previously, as students seek work for periods of fifteen months between completion of VCE and University, to enable their qualification for Youth Allowance at the independent rate.

In many cases, these students would not otherwise qualify for Youth Allowance, since, as dependents, their parents farming land assets are taken into consideration, irrespective of their reduced ability to generate income during the drought period.

Whilst a period of deferral can often be beneficial, enabling students to develop independence and to confirm their study interests, in many instances they will become dependent on a working income, and find it very difficult to return to the financial constraints of a student budget.

Often this will mean that the students do not subsequently take-up their university position, and in other cases, there will be a need to continue working excessive hours just to survive, with consequent impacts on their ability to complete their studies to the highest potential level of achievement.
b) Potential geographic, economic, social, cultural and other influences on university applications, offers, acceptances and completions across Victorian communities

Recently released data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics pertaining to 2006 Census data indicates a heavy bias towards Relative Socio-Economic Disadvantage in the rural Local Government Areas of Northern and North-West Victoria, with nine of ten most disadvantaged Shires located in these areas. These figures are extrapolated from statistics relating to income levels, educational attainment, unemployment rates and motor vehicle ownership.

(2033.0.55.001 Census of Population and Housing: Socio-economic Indexes for Areas, Australia. ABS, 26th March 2008)

Whilst not explaining the causative relationship between the factors measured, this data highlights that there is a distinct correlation between the factors, entrenching Socio-Economic Disadvantage in these areas.

As education is the most straightforward manner in which an individual’s socio-economic position can be improved, it follows that any attempts to reverse the disadvantage would most profitably be directed at improving access and uptake of educational opportunities for students in these areas.

**Economic:** Because of the extra burden of often having to move long distances from the family home many prospective students are often deterred from studying. Farming families in these times of drought are under extra strain to find the resources to send their children to university.

**HECS:** Although there is yet to be a definitive report that supports the hypothesis that HECS deters rural and working class students from attending university. There appears to be much anecdotal evidence to suggest that HECS increases are an issue and directly influence along with other financial imposts on a student’s decision to study or not.

A recent article in the Australian quoted the Vice-Chancellor of Deakin University, Sally Walker, as believing the HECS increases were impacting on the decisions of rural and regional students; as well as on Mature-age students and first generation students (Walker, S., The Australian 12/3/2008: 27).

**Income support:** Currently does not take into account the extra cost of moving away from home which is often very significant for students from the more remote rural areas. Distance is also an issue here because students are then further away from the support system they are likely to need if they are financially constrained. Indeed the high cost of keeping in contact with family and friends, through telephone or travel home, imposes a considerable cost burden on students.
These costs are somewhat ameliorated by the presence of regional university campuses, which often enable rural students to study closer to home, and facing lower accommodation costs than if they needed to relocate to a Capital City university. Notwithstanding this, however, there is no recognition within the current income support framework of the apparent contradiction that a 19 year old student living in a rented property 300 kilometres from home, and making all their own decisions about their day-to-day life is not ordinarily regarded as being “independent” when their entitlement is being assessed.

As previously indicated, many regional students defer their studies by necessity so as to qualify for Youth Allowance at independent rates.

We contend that students who are required to move away from home to undertake university studies should qualify for Youth Allowance at the “independent” rate, since, for all intents and purposes, they are required to be “independent” in how they manage their lives, including their study, work and living arrangements. Indeed, it is ludicrous to pretend that such students are other than independent, particularly when one looks at the numbers whose parents are not in any position to support them financially at all.

**Social / cultural:** Loss of community, different environment and expectations, first generation to attend university, and lack of support networks are all factors that can have a profound impact on retention rates, particularly in regional communities, where there is both a significantly higher rate of physical dislocation of students, and a lower level of knowledge about what to expect at university arising from the higher rate of “first generation” attendance.

One of the solutions to these issues has been provided in the past by activities and services funded from the compulsory amenities and services fees levied by universities. However, the introduction of the Federal “Voluntary Student Unionism” legislation has resulted in a dramatic contraction in both services and the level at which they are provided on university campuses.

In many cases, regional campuses have fared worst from this, since they are not able to achieve the economies of scale that allow for provision of a full range of services at a low "per capita" cost and as “replacement” services are not available in the adjacent communities. In many instances, reduction or elimination of these services has also reduced the amount of interaction between university students and their adjacent communities.

Without these support services, (which also includes the opportunities to build social networks through events and membership of clubs and societies) the barriers to entry and completion by regional students have been significantly increased. The full impact of this, though, has not been felt yet, as we are still in an initial phase of massive contraction of services, and many universities have provided a level of funding for a short (typically two – three years) period which has masked the impact in the short-term. We believe that unless the
new Federal government moves to overcome this issue, regional university campuses and their students will be severely dis-advantaged in the near-term.

c) Potential effects of geographic differences in participation in higher education on skills shortages and the Victorian economy

Skilled professionals are needed in regional Victoria if these areas are to prosper and continue to develop. In order to increase the number of professionals in these areas, it is important that we both train our own regional students, and have the ability to attract city-based students to study in our regional areas. Nurses, doctors, teachers, accountants, lawyers, social workers, engineers, and ICT professionals are all needed to support our regional areas if they are to progress economically. Since these areas are starting from a relatively lower skill base than Capital cities, it is vital that the passage to university is made as straight-forward as possible for all of our young people who would benefit from it. In these areas, the presence of a comprehensive university is also very significant in catering for the career re-skilling that is vital for our mature-aged population if we are to overcome the current skill-gap that is predicted to become a significant barrier to development of our economy.

Without a university education, regional Victorians will not just be marginalised from the Victorian economy, but also from the global economy. The presence of regional university opportunities is important if our young people are to have opportunities to realise their full potential. Whilst important for local economic development, from a social equity perspective, it is vital that regional students also have the opportunity to develop skills and knowledge that will enable them to find their place in the world. Our regional students are just as talented as those born in urban areas, and it is important that they should have full opportunity to maximise their potential.

It is also an issue in regional areas that are experiencing difficulties in attracting mid-career professionals to regional areas if local educational opportunities are perceived as inadequate. This has been an issue in Bendigo for several years, creating difficulties for many businesses in recruiting staff to key roles within organisations. In order to overcome the skills shortages in regional areas, and indeed, to continue to stimulate local businesses and communities through an influx of new people with diverse experience, it is important that educational facilities in our regional areas are not seen to dis-advantage those who are considering re-locating to these areas.
What could be done to address any barriers to university participation for students from different geographic areas?

Recommendations:

The BSA recommends that more scholarships be specifically provided for rural and regional Australians for the purpose of tertiary study; and that the Victorian Government lobby the Federal Government for such scholarships. Perhaps targeted at first generation university students.

The BSA recommends that student income support adequately address the inherent costs in relocating for rural and regional Australian pursuing tertiary studies; and the Victorian Government lobby for such income support.

The BSA recommends that the Victorian Government review Public Transport access for rural and regional Victorians with the specific aim of reducing the cost and burden of tertiary students – both domestic and international.

The BSA recommends that the Regional loading for regional universities and metropolitan universities with regional campuses be adequately funded as to provide world-class tertiary institutions in regional Victoria, not only in terms of education, but also in terms of student services; and the Victorian Government actively lobby the Federal Government for such funding or provide a regional loading itself.

The BSA recommends that the Victorian Government with its legislative responsibility of Victorian Universities require Victorian Universities with regional Campuses to adequate provide access to relevant courses to rural and regional Victorians. This also includes adequate access to flexible modes of delivery.

Conclusions:

The BSA believes that if the above stated issue are not addressed in the near future that these issues will have negative impacts on many rural and regional Victorians lives. Many prospective tertiary students from rural and regional Victoria will no-longer be able to countenance the financial burden of studying. This will then have negative social, cultural, technological, and economic effects on the rural and regional Victorian economy and community, but also the Victorian economy as a whole. If all Victorians are to play a role in a global economy and benefit from all of the opportunities that offers, then a tertiary education will be paramount for all Victorians, not only those who live within the confines of Melbourne.