To: Education and Training Committee

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

My experiences since finishing year 12 at Ballarat High School in 2005 to now, the first year of a double degree in Arts/Science at Monash University, have made clear to me that for many rural and regional students, the viability of obtaining a tertiary education is dire.

Although rural and regional students have career ambitions equal to their city counterparts, for many of these students meeting the minimum entrance requirements of their desired field of study is simply unachievable. Whilst the Special Entry Access Scheme provides a step up for some tertiary applicants, it is a slap in the face for those students who try hard in Year 12 and miss out on a tertiary place by more than a few points. I know, as an ex-pupil of a regional high school and a very small rural secondary college (Beaufort Secondary College), that there are severe issues with the standard of secondary education in non-metropolitan areas and I believe these problems need to be identified and rectified immediately.

Some problems I observed as a non-metropolitan student were:

- Lack of realization of the possibility for regional schools to network and share resources, especially between public and private institutions.
- Narrow scope of subjects on offer in smaller schools, not meeting student interest.
- Poor structure of pre-VCE learning units; poor linkage between pre-VCE learning units and VCE units, and a lack of emphasis on the importance of VCE in career pathways.
- Shortage of motivated teachers.
- Absence of a competitive atmosphere (in an academic sense) across year levels.
- Less opportunity to attend workshops and lectures of the same standard of those offered in metropolitan areas.
• Limited access to higher learning programs.

The question of whether or not to undertake tertiary study needs to be supplemented by the question of where to study, as I believe the worry of how one will be able get to school influences the choices VCE students make when they consider tertiary study.

Obviously, for many students the answer is moving away from the family home. In my case, I chose to defer my CSP place at the University of Melbourne for a year (2006) so I could work for a year to earn enough money to move out of home. I was not eligible for Youth Allowance because my parents earn too much. However, like many other regional and rural families, they have neither the luxury of a professional job or a professional income, but work hard to provide a livable income to their household. Without any assistance from Centrelink, the cost of on-campus accommodation equates to big sacrifices and tightening of the family budget, and is not always an affordable option. I, along with most of my friends from high school, was left to figure out the problem of where I could afford to live on my own.

After a year of full time work, I moved into private rental accommodation in Melbourne (which was only obtained by a ‘rental bid’ after three months of unsuccessful applications) with my partner who had also deferred and worked for the year. My parents gave me a weekly allowance and my partner had a part time job and received Youth Allowance, but before the end of the first semester we ran out of savings and my partner (from Learmonth, a rural town outside Ballarat) could no longer afford to buy the equipment for his photography course, so he discontinued his studies and took up full time work. I discontinued my course a few weeks into the second semester due to financial pressure, lack of support from the University and a general dissatisfaction with the course.

At no stage did we receive any help or support, financial or otherwise\(^1\), from any institution. We had barely enough money to pay for rent, bills, groceries, transport, and the sundry costs of our course, and we had no time to work extra hours.

\(^1\) Apart from my partner’s brief eligibility for Youth Allowance.
I strongly advocate the development of an assistance program to meet the needs of rural and regional students making the transition to life in the city away from home. In addition, I believe the eligibility criteria for Youth Allowance is inadequate and potentially unfair; urgent re-evaluation is needed.

The main reason I am now able to study full time is because I have a very supportive partner who works full time to support us both. I am still ineligible for Youth Allowance, this time because my partner (who is the same age as me) earns too much ($650 a week for 50-60 hours work). I am exceptionally lucky to have this support, yet I feel it is an unfair burden on a twenty-year-old to have to spend, on somebody else, money that could be saved towards a big purchase or invested for the future. If I were not so lucky and didn’t have this support, my studies would be severely affected. I would undoubtedly reduce my workload to part time, live at home with my parents in Ballarat and travel via public transport to Clayton on school days. This option would extend my course to eight years in duration (compared to four) and each school day I would spend six hours commuting, via three different trains and a bus. This is clearly not a good option, however I know students who have to commute from as far away as Ballarat and Ocean Grove on a daily basis. There is currently no solution to the dilemma of middle-families who are ineligible for Centrelink payments yet can’t afford to support a full time tertiary student living away from home.

In summary, if all Victorians are to be able to undertake tertiary study in their desired field of study regardless of where the family home is, the following actions need to occur:

- The VCE needs to become a more level playing field in terms of rural/regional vs. metropolitan standards of education.
- Alternatives to on-campus living need to be investigated and made available at a cost effective price for middle class rural and regional students.
- The amount of money needed to support a full time tertiary student needs to be re-assessed with consideration of the current cost of living, and this cost in addition to the cost of relocation from a rural/regional area to a metropolitan area needs to be incorporated into the eligibility criteria for Youth Allowance.
If these issues are addressed, it is my belief all Victorians will have equal opportunity to pursue tertiary education, and perhaps the presuppositions of what Victorian teenagers from rural and regional areas can achieve in their careers and their lives will change.

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