22 May 2008

Ms Karen Ellingford
Executive Officer
Education & Training Committee
Parliament House
Spring Street
East Melbourne Vic 3002

Dear Ms Ellingford,

RE: Additional Submission - Education and Training Committee
Inquiry into Geographical Differences in the Rate in which Victorian Students Participate in Higher Education

Further to East Gippsland Institute of TAFE (EGTAFE) submission of 18 March 2008 we provide additional information as follows:

Comments on Terms of Reference

1. RMIT Bachelor Commerce program currently has 35-42 students enrolled at the Bairnsdale Campus of EGTAFE.

RMIT/EGTAFE has experienced an increase in deferrals over the last three years (2006-2008). Reasons given by deferring students include:
- the need to work in paid employment to gain “Independence status” for Austudy purposes
- “just need a break from study”
- not really sure about what they want to do - effectively by deferring they are securing a scarce, much-sought-after university place as a “back up plan”, if nothing else comes off during the year they’ve always got their uni place to fall back on.

2. EG TAFE had a very successful pathway from the Cert IV in Financial Services course into the RMIT Bachelor of Commerce program when the TAFE course was offered on-campus. This was promoted to the Secondary students as a “back up plan” should they not get the score to get into their desired university program.

It is interesting to note however that the students who did enter the B.Com degree through this pathway did not necessarily commence the Cert IV TAFE course with the end-goal of undertaking a degree. After studying in the TAFE environment their confidence in themselves, their study skills and their ability grew. They were also taught by supportive tutors who taught in both the TAFE course and the B.Com degree program. This had a big impact on the students even contemplating undertaking studies at the Higher Ed level. These students were well-prepared to take on the challenges of Higher Ed study.
There have been 28 graduates from the B.Com degree from 2005-07. Ten of these graduates (36%) have come through the EG TAFE pathway. Of these ten graduates 7 (70%) have, by choice, secured employment locally (in Government organisations, education, financial planning and the private sector). It is also worth noting that all students who commence the B.Com program through the EG TAFE pathway complete the degree.

3. Influences on university applications:
   - Inability of the family to fund the additional cost of effectively maintaining a “second home” if their child has to re-locate to study
   - Living and accommodation (sourcing accommodation and the costs involved) – especially given the Higher Ed academic year is effectively only 6 months. If a student finds off-campus accommodation they are more-often-than-not required to take out a 12 month lease.
   - Travel costs – access to public transport (from the country to the university location); the need to have their own vehicle. If studying in Melbourne, ability to get home during the semester.
   - Distance
   - Needs of family and family business may preclude students from studying.
   - Employment opportunities to support themselves whilst studying
   - Being away from their family, friends and familiar surroundings
   - The desire to “get away” from the country
   - The desire to be independent and live away from home
   - The want of greater social and cultural engagement in a different setting

4. Advantages for participation in Higher Ed in rural areas:

Advantages to students and their families:
   - Cost savings
   - Ability to retain employment position, living arrangements, etc
   - Smaller class sizes
   - Students matter – because of smaller class sizes they are not just a number; student progress can be more closely monitored
   - Supportive tutors who have a genuine concern in the students’ progress and achievement
   - Ability to attain a degree from a world-recognised university. The students’ qualification has instant recognition and credibility - they are able to use this degree locally, in an urban location or internationally

Advantages to the community:
   - The local community increases its knowledge-base and its skill set. Positions can be filled by people who come from the local area and therefore have an understanding and appreciation of the culture and environment they will be working in.
   - The students research local organisations – findings add value to the organisation through their implementation.
   - Employment opportunities for tutors and support staff.
   - Provision of highly sought-after, qualified graduates who have an understanding and an appreciation of the rural environment. Graduates are a scarce commodity in a growing region such as Gippsland.

5. Disadvantages for participation in Higher Ed in rural areas:

Disadvantages to students and their families:
   - Lack of full access to support services offered by the partnership university. These support services are often unable to be provided by the TAFE Institute at the level required in a Higher Ed setting.
A recent issue involved careers support from Melbourne (specific to the needs of Higher Ed graduates). The solution suggested by Melbourne was rather than one of their careers advisors to visit the students in Bairnsdale, the Bairnsdale students could make a trip to Melbourne. When this was put before the student representatives they raised the issues of work commitments, family commitments, time and costs of travel as being barriers to full participation by all students in this option.

- Lack of appreciation and understanding from Melbourne/ city counterparts concerning the environment and the constraints of the environment that rural people operate in.

**Disadvantages to the community:**
- Availability of sourcing tutors for some specialised units.
- Costs associated with delivery in rural areas are higher due to smaller class sizes.

6. Strategies to address barriers
- Increase the offering of Higher Ed courses in rural areas.
- Increased funding in the following areas aimed at increasing the experience and quality of Higher Ed received by the rural student
  - enhance the support services offered by the partnership university to the rural students;
  - increase the ability of partnership university personnel to visit rural campuses in an effort to gain a greater appreciation/ understanding of the rural campus and its environment
- Online study is not the answer in itself. Not all students are suited to studying online (especially when taking on Higher Ed study for the first time – they need to be more fully supported). If online study is considered as a viable option for rural students it needs to be supported adequately by the online tutor and backed up with face-to-face sessions.

Yours sincerely,

[Signature]

Catherine Briggs
Associate Director, Learning & Innovation
East Gippsland Institute of TAFE

Cc: Angela Hutson, CEO
    Lynda Capes, RMIT Bachelor of Commerce Co-ordinator
    Ann Furphy, Manager Business and Information Technology