18th March 2008

Ms Karen Ellingford  
Executive Officer  
Education and Training Committee  
Parliament House  
Spring Street  
EAST MELBOURNE VIC 3002  
Email: etc@parliament.vic.gov.au

Dear Ms Ellingford

Re: Parliamentary Inquiry into Geographical Difference in the Rate in which Victorian Students Participate in Higher Education.

I refer to the above enquiry and the invitation from Geoff Howard MP, the chair of the committee for a submission to be made before the 18th March 2008, on the issues relevant to the terms of reference.

As the Regional Representative of Engineers Australia in Victoria, I would appreciate if the following comments could be referred to the Committee, on behalf of Engineers Australia, Victorian Division:

1. Post compulsory Education and Training in Regional and Rural areas, particularly in the engineering sciences is greatly affected by the number of teachers/lecturers that are available in colleges who have an engineering/science background. In previous generations, the seeking of a career in education by qualified engineers was common place. However, with higher benefits, the lower number of Engineers Graduating challenges in both the private sector, particularly the mining industry, and other pursuits, the number of Lecturers that have an Engineering background is indeed limited. In my Region (Wimmera) there are no Engineers teaching in secondary colleges to my knowledge. As a consequence students are not given the incentive or indeed the enthusiasm embraced by tutors with an Engineering background to participate in tertiary education in Engineering and/or the physical sciences. This may be different in the Metropolitan area, however, the shortage of Engineers in general in Rural areas results in the education sector being poorly represented and as a consequence our profession being less promoted than other professions. My solution to this issue is to ensure that the rewards of an Engineering teaching/lecturing career in Rural Victoria are acknowledged.

2. The disadvantages and advantages of participation in education and training for school leavers in the Regional areas is significantly influenced by the availability of courses that can be easily accessed and are affordable for the participants. Currently there is no financial assistance and/or tax relief for Regional and Rural area families to assist in the financing of their school leavers in tertiary education despite the inequitable balance between Metropolitan and Rural/Regional students costs.

For example, the cost of sending a student to Melbourne in accommodation/residential college fees/transport is a considerable financial burden on many families (e.g. $15,000-$20,000) compared to a metropolitan student.
Until a more equal opportunity training and education program for tertiary education away from home is introduced, the participation rate of regional students will continue to decline, particularly with the added burdens of poor public transport, high fuel costs and reduced family income due to drought. The compromise for this situation would be for wider access to distance learning programs, subsidy payments for travel and accommodation together with tax deductibility for costs where appropriate.

3. Skills shortages continue to be a concern in the rural areas and are particularly aggravated by the salary imbalance being offered in Rural areas compared with more favourable opportunities in the mining and/or private sector. As part of the skills shortages processes that have been implemented by Government, I draw to your attention a deficiency in the Skilled Migration Scheme, whereby that scheme offers employers in the Regional areas, employees from overseas, however, it fails to deliver any assistance and support for the employer in making an overseas/migrant skilled appointment a success. The program concentrates greatly on the welfare of the migrant family, their housing and their social wellbeing but does not provide any support for the employer in training and/or assimilation of an overseas skilled migrant into the workplace. I contend that unless these overseas skilled migrants are assimilated into the workplace, with training sessions freely available for both the migrant and in particular the employer (for example, communication skills for both parties) then the good intent of the skilled migrant program is lost. The potential for the migrant to lose his position and hence his place in the community, is high. I would welcome a review of the skilled migrant program support in Regional and Rural areas.

4. I trust this outline of my consideration on this most important issue for higher education, particularly for professional Engineers, is of benefit to the Committee and if possible I would be willing to present myself for the committee to further explanation of these issues.

Yours faithfully

Dr Ian Kerr FIEAust CPEng
State Chairman
Engineers Australia, Victoria Division

AND

Mr David J Eltringham FIEAust CPEng
General Manager Technical Services Horsham Rural City Council
Regional Representative, Division Committee, Victorian Division, Engineers Australia