31 March 2008

Ms Karen Ellingford  
Executive Officer  
Education and Training Committee  
Parliament House  
Spring Street  
EAST MELBOURNE VIC 3002

Dear Karen,

Re: Parliamentary inquiry into geographical differences in the rate in which Victorian students participate in higher education

Thank you for the extension to the deadline. I am pleased to provide a submission by the Equity and Access Unit to the above inquiry.

I would be happy to elaborate on any aspect on the submission if requested.

Yours sincerely,

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Submission to the

Parliamentary Inquiry into Geographical Differences in the rate in which Victorian Students Participate in Higher Education

Compiled by the

Equity and Access Unit, La Trobe University

March 2008
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Executive Summary

The Equity and Access Unit at La Trobe University is pleased to provide a response to this Parliamentary inquiry. This submission provides information on research outcomes relating to Victorian rural students’ access to higher education; information on existing support services available to rural students at La Trobe; and an overview on best practice strategies being implemented in Canada.

Research into Victorian Rural Students Access to Higher Education

The Equity and Access Unit at La Trobe University conducted research in 2006 into the factors which influence university access for secondary students in rural Victoria. The findings from this research indicated that the key factors were:

- financial (costs of courses, and financial support while studying);
- availability of part-time employment while studying;
- finding affordable and convenient accommodation;
- access to transport to and from a university campus;
- parental support and encouragement;
- access to inspiring role models who have a university background; and
- access to adequate career guidance and university information session.

Impact of the extended drought

The submission also refers to the findings of a 2006 research study for DEST into the impact of drought on secondary education access in Australia’s rural and remote areas. These findings are very similar to those discussed above.

Current policies and programs at La Trobe University

The submission provides information on a number of programs offered by La Trobe to assist students from regional and remote areas. These include:

- financial assistance scholarships and accommodation scholarships;
- a targeted access scheme for regional students from low socio-economic background;
- a bonus ENTER points scheme for students from targeted rural schools;
- provision of on-campus accommodation and other accommodation services at both metropolitan and regional campuses;
- provision of bus transport subsidies to promote attendance at University Open Days by students from rural schools; and
- provision of services to assist students in their transition to university (eg mentoring and volunteering programs; clubs and societies; counselling; orientation events).

International Comparisons

The submission provides a brief overview of research and projects undertaken as part of the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation program. It also refers to policy recommendations arising from an OECD report regarding equity in education.
Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry into Geographical Differences in the rate in which Victorian Students Participate in Higher Education. The University has provided a submission which provides an overall perspective of issues raised by the Inquiry. However, it is pertinent to repeat here that La Trobe has several regional campuses: Bendigo, Albury/Wodonga, Shepparton, Mildura and Beechworth as well as two metropolitan campuses: Bundoora (main campus) and the City campus.

This submission focuses on the area of equity and access as it relates to the role of the Equity and Access Unit at La Trobe University. The Equity and Access Unit has responsibility, amongst other things, for assisting University staff in developing outreach programs to attract and support students from the equity groups as defined by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR). The Unit also has responsibility to promote full and equal participation of all students and staff of La Trobe University and to foster an environment free of discrimination and harassment.

It is important to recognise also the diversity of the Victorian population. In March 2007, La Trobe University had a total of 26,500 students. Of those students:

- 3,129 local students were born overseas from 129 countries of origin;
- 4,608 international students, representing 105 different countries of origin;
- 6,460 of our students spoke a language other than English at home covering 105 different languages; and
- 82 Indigenous students¹

In 2007 La Trobe University had 6,995 students who come from regional or remote areas, of whom 31% study at metropolitan campuses and 69% study at regional campuses. The University has over 6,000 students enrolled at the regional campuses, and these students are drawn from both regional and metropolitan locations.

Student Equity Groups

As you may be aware, as part of the higher education reforms of the late 1980s and early 1990s, and the Commonwealth Government’s discussion paper A fair chance for all: higher education that’s within everyone’s reach² a number of under-represented groups in higher education were identified. The objective of the national reforms in higher education was not only to increase access and participation in higher education but to also increase the participation of disadvantaged groups in society. The identified groups were:

- people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds;
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people;
- Women (in non-traditional areas of study);
- people from non-English speaking backgrounds;
- people with disabilities; and
- people from rural and isolated areas.³

³ Ibid.
Although the number of students from these under-represented groups has increased since the early 1990s, there are still several factors that impact adversely on the level of participation in education by these groups.

**Inquiry question 1: Any particular challenges faced by students from specific geographic locations (eg outer suburban, rural or remote areas)**

In 2006, La Trobe University undertook a study which explored the nature of the issues affecting students living in the Loddon Campaspe Mallee region from three specific equity groups: rural and isolated, people with a disability and people from low socio-economic background.

The data was gathered through individual interviews with senior secondary school students in the Loddon Campaspe Mallee region who identified with one or more of the three equity groups as defined by the Commonwealth government. Interviews with teachers from this region were also undertaken.

This submission represents in part, some of the findings of this study. Whilst the study was undertaken in one particular region in Victoria, many of the issues identified could easily be the case in other regions of Victoria.

There were a number of factors that were identified by both teachers and students which influenced the decision of students to participate in higher education. The following represents an overview of the findings of our study.

**Financial factors**

A number of financial factors were identified by teachers and students as having an influence on the decision to follow a path to higher education, including sources of financial support and the costs associated with higher education. For some students there was also a lack of awareness of the financial support available (i.e. Commonwealth Scholarships and HECS). Financial factors influenced decisions on what type of higher education students would access (university or TAFE), with some students preferring to go on to TAFE rather than university because of the cost of courses. Financial factors can also influence whether students would attend higher education institutions in regional or metropolitan areas, with Bendigo and other regional areas perceived as being more “financially affordable” than metropolitan areas.

**Sources of financial support**

The main source of financial support identified by teachers and students were parents, who provide financial assistance with relocation costs, living expenses including rent and transport and with educational fees. Despite parents being willing to assist students financially, some students wanted to become independent and be able to support themselves.

Participants from rural areas and those of low socio-economic backgrounds reported they would rely on Youth Allowance to assist them in financing their higher education. However, some knew very little about or were unsure if they would qualify. Some reported that Youth Allowance alone would not be enough to finance their higher education and therefore they would need to seek additional financial support.

Means testing of income and assets may mean that some rural students and those from farms may not qualify for Youth Allowance or other government financial assistance. Some students said they would still try to go on to higher education even if they did not qualify for Youth Allowance.

Deferring studies for a year or applying for higher education the following year was reported not to be uncommon amongst rural or socio-economically disadvantaged students. Teachers reported that students are increasingly taking a year off by deferring...
their study or not applying until the following year in order to seek employment and then apply for the independent rate of Youth Allowance.

Other sources of financial support identified by students and teachers included scholarships. Scholarships available specifically for rural and isolated students were reported by teachers as being an advantage in enabling rural students to have access to higher education. However, it appeared that students who were more proactive were more likely to apply for scholarships or other financial assistance. Teachers reported that participation in higher education may be increased if institutions were able to increase the availability of scholarships or financial support to students.

Students participating in the study were aware of scholarships available to students from rural and isolated areas. Students felt that if they received a scholarship they would be more inclined to use it to pay the costs of accommodation rather than on tuition fees such as HECS which can be paid back later through the taxation system. Students also reported that they would need some form of supplementary financial assistance such as part-time work in addition to a scholarship.

**Costs associated with higher education**

Together with costs of relocating, accommodation and transport students are faced with increasing costs to attend university including the HECS-HELP scheme (previously known as the Higher Education Contribution Scheme – HECS). However, in the case of the students in this study, HECS-HELP does not appear to be such a barrier to accessing higher education, as payment for HECS-HELP can be deferred.

Some students indicated that they were unaware of HECS-HELP and the ability to defer payments until earning an income over a certain amount. Others were more aware of the scheme and saw it as a benefit that they could "pay off". Teachers participating in the study reported that being able to defer HECS-HELP was a good idea and enabled students to access higher education. The teachers did not think HECS-HELP was a deterrent.

**Employment factors**

Nearly all students participating in the study stated that they would need some form of part-time employment in order to access higher education. Knowing they had part-time work would influence their decision over which institution they would attend. Although their parents were willing to assist financially the students believed they would still need some form of additional income.

When asked about the reasons for wanting employment, participants reported wanting to become independent and to pay for transport costs and other living expenses including accommodation; however, they did say that "mum and dad would be there" if they needed assistance. Alternatively, some students defer studies for a year in order to enter the workforce and earn money to be able to finance their higher education.

Another common reason students undertake employment during secondary school or defer studies for a year is to qualify for the independent rate of Youth Allowance. Many students from rural and isolated areas undertake part-time work during high school in order to save money to go on to higher education.

Students and teachers in one town stated that one of the advantages of living in a rural/isolated area is the opportunity to get work with large companies in the farming industry which paid well. This provided students with enough money to last them an entire year and enabled them to qualify for the independent Youth Allowance rate. The recent impact of the drought means that many in the community will not have the same level of employment as they had in previous years.
Issues of accessing employment

Some of the barriers for accessing part-time work include not knowing what work is available or not having appropriate work skills. Some students were worried that their “country skills”, could not be carried over to employment in a regional or metropolitan centre. Students stated that if they were able to find employment utilising existing skills that this would help make their choice about where they would attend higher education “a lot easier”.

Another area of concern for the students was relocation and not being able to apply for part-time work. Students were concerned about their inability to apply for positions at the end of the year, because they would not know where they have been offered a higher education place, and therefore many jobs may already be filled by the time they relocate. (First round offers for university places do not take place until about mid January each year.)

Students were concerned that finding part-time work away from home could be difficult as evidenced by their friends and family members who have gone on to higher education before them. In some cases students reported that it has taken friends “six or seven months” to find part-time employment.

Study commitments may influence some students’ decision to find part-time employment. Some students felt that working and studying at the same time would be a “bit too much” and are therefore reluctant to take on part-time employment. Evidence shows that undertaking paid employment can significantly impact on students’ academic performance and that students who undertake paid employment with study are frequently juggling competing demands on their time.4

Residential accommodation

There were a number of issues identified by participants in relation to accommodation which can influence the decision to access higher education, including the sources of accommodation and issues surrounding access to accommodation.

A number of sources for finding accommodation were identified and students were more likely to base their decision on where they will attend higher education according to the accommodation that is available to them. Relatives are considered a popular choice for accommodation by many students as they can often live rent free or much cheaper than if they were living elsewhere.

Having friends or past students from secondary school can be an influencing factor on which higher education students select to attend and can also make it easier for them to find accommodation.

For some students having to leave home is a significant issue. Some students report feeling “daunted” and “scared” about having to leave home and think that it would be stressful and uncomfortable leaving their familiar environment.

Another issue associated with leaving home to access higher education is the cost of living. Teachers feel that students from rural areas are at a disadvantage compared with their metropolitan counterparts and that rural students do not have the option to “live with mum and dad” which can make it “harder” for rural students.

The location of accommodation and transport are also issues for many students. Many students stated that they would prefer to live on or close to campus, especially if they were in a metropolitan area. Some students reported wanting to live close to campus because of transport issues, with some feeling that using the public transport system in

metropolitan areas could be “difficult” and “stressful”. Despite being aware of on-campus accommodation students were unaware that universities could provide assistance to students in finding other forms of accommodation.

**Transport**

Consistent with previous studies, transport is an issue faced by many rural and isolated students in accessing higher education. A number of issues were identified by participants in relation to transport including sources of transport, access to transport and the costs associated with transport. Students reported relying on relatives and friends, having their own private transport or access to public transport in order to access higher education.

Past students and siblings who already attend higher education are common sources of transport for some students getting between home and University or TAFE. Students often relied on having their own private transport. Students in rural areas reported needing their own car because rural areas have “got no transport”. Some students reporting that having their own car would be essential in them being able to attend higher education and going back home.

Parents often purchased cars for students. However, this was not the case for some students and if they wanted a car they would have "to pay for it". Some students who buy their own car are left with debts and loans to pay off and this can influence their decision on whether or not they go on to higher education or alternatively seek employment.

The costs associated with running and maintaining a car was also a “big thing” for some students. Petrol and distance to travel contributed considerably to the running of a car over the year. For many rural students it would not be feasible to have a car without part-time work.

Students reported that they would be willing to use other modes of transport. Some considered riding and walking to university “easier” than driving and would reduce transport costs. Car pooling between students is a popular way of travelling between home and university in order to reduce costs. Teachers and students reported that in the past students start off driving home by themselves but they end up sharing the costs of fuel and can “come home in one car”.

Students considering moving to a metropolitan area to undertake higher education reported that they would be more inclined to use public transport. However, there were a number of barriers identified in doing this including not knowing how the metropolitan public transport system works and limited access to rural public transport to return home.

Students expressed their concern over not understanding the public transport system in metropolitan areas. However using the public transport system in regional areas such as Bendigo was not considered to be “too big a step” for some students as they frequented these Centres more often.

Limited public transport in rural areas can make it difficult for students to go between home and university with some towns only having buses once or twice a week. Transport was also reported to be a barrier for students accessing information about higher education. Students and their parents are required to pay travel expenses to get to regional and metropolitan areas to attend open days and other information sessions.

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and those that are unable to afford the costs are more likely to be the ones who do not attend these sessions. Those that do attend information sessions tended to car pool.

Some schools reported that whilst they knew other schools in their area provided a bus service to take students and parents to open days and share the costs; they do not offer this service. Whilst schools encourage students to attend open days they also felt that it was important that parents attend with their children. One school in previous years offered to run a bus service but this suggestion received very little interest and therefore it was not considered to be financially viable for them to do so.

**Family, social and personal factors**

Students and teachers identified family and social support as being significant in students from equity groups accessing higher education. There were also a number of personal factors identified by students which can influence their decision to go on to higher education.

**Family support**

Most students reported that they had their parents support in their decision to undertake higher education and that having that support was really important. Some students reported that their parents may not be “happy” to support them with their higher education, but they would still assist them. Some students who were not planning on immediately going on to higher education also reported that their parents were not always supportive.

Being able to keep in contact with family and having family close by in case of emergencies are important influencing factors for some students in deciding whether they will attend a regional or metropolitan university.

Parents attitudes can influence whether students decide to go on to higher education or not, with a lack of parental education and the costs of attending university influencing attitudes. Teachers reported that parents not having gone to university themselves and the costs of attending university may influence parental attitudes and that they may encourage their children to “leave school and get a job”. Teachers also advised that students from low socio-economic backgrounds were less likely to be supported or encouraged to undertake higher education as the parents do not consider higher education to be “important” and that instead children may be expected to “pull their weight”.

However, teachers report that not all parents are unsupportive and that many parents would “put themselves out” to help their children. Teachers also report that traditionally students from farming backgrounds would have returned to the farm after Year 12, with the expectation from parents that students would “work on the family farm or get married and have children”. However, parents are now more aware and “supportive” of their children having additional skills and are therefore more supportive of them going on to further education.

**Parents’ education**

Some of the students interviewed reported that they would be the first generation in their family to enter higher education. Teachers felt that parent’s level of education can influence whether students decide to go on to university. Some teachers felt that students whose parent(s) had a higher education or who had siblings who went onto higher education were more likely to follow that “pattern” and were more likely to do well in school.

Teachers also felt that it could be more difficult for students whose parents do not have a higher education background to stay on at school and then go on to higher education themselves. They also felt that parents who do not have a higher education are more likely to be from a socio-economically disadvantaged background and therefore do not have “the skills to cope”.

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Issues surrounding first generation entry in to higher education need to be considered when examining the under-representation of specific equity groups and in particular those of low socio-economic status.\(^6\) Students who identify as being first generation entrants into higher education are more likely to be of low-socioeconomic background or from a rural area.\(^7\) Parents’ attitudes toward higher education and the lack of support from parents could be attributed to less value being placed on higher education and therefore students are more likely to be encouraged to seek employment as an alternative.\(^8\) Parental support which extends beyond just their financial support appears to greatly influence a student’s decision to go on to higher education.

**Social support**

Some teachers reported that students from rural areas who have to move away from home may lack social support compared with their metropolitan counterparts; and that many may feel like “fish out of water” and not have any “connection” with the people around them. It is not uncommon for students to apply for the same university because friends or people they know already attend there and they already have established social networks. Students are more likely to apply for a regional university because it is close to home and because there are other rural students there.

One teacher reported that whilst rural students may be isolated attending a university away from their hometown, those who came from conservative communities may find others who are “like minded” and this could assist in establishing social networks.

Some students felt that leaving their home town to undertake higher education would be a “big change”. Students felt they would be leaving a place where they know “every single person” to attend a place where they “won’t know anyone” which could be a “big shock”.

Feelings of worry and being “daunted” about not having the same support systems at university as they would have if they were at home was a concern for some students. Having social support available when they attended higher education was considered to be an important factor for many rural students and would assist them with their transition into higher education. Some schools provide assistance in creating social support networks for students who are going on to higher education by organising social gathering with students via their Local Learning and Employment Network (LLEN) worker.

Some students felt that it would be important to meet other rural students when they went on to higher education. They also felt that other rural students would be able to “relate” to rural issues more than city kids, however, they didn’t feel that they were all that different from city students and that an opportunity to mix with rural and city students was important.

**Personal factors**

A number of personal factors were identified by students and teachers which can influence the decision to go on to higher education. Teachers reported that some students who are from low socio-economic backgrounds do not “aspire to great heights” academically or lack “confidence” to go on to higher education, and that some parents “discourage” their children from going on to higher education. Whilst some students

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may not feel "capable" of going on to higher education others are more confident in their abilities. This supports previous studies which have shown that students of socio-economic disadvantage often perceive they do not have the academic ability to go on to higher education.9

As James et al point out in their study, students of low socio-economic status also tend to hold the belief that their parents do not want them to go on to higher education.10 Teachers felt that in some instances parents may discourage their child from accessing higher education because they are unable to afford to send them away to study and that some students may narrow their options and choose to get a job rather than go on to higher education because of the family's financial circumstances.

Students reported mixed feelings and perceptions about higher education, some students reported knowing that they always wanted to go on to higher education, and despite some finding staying at school "difficult" they were determined to finish. Some students were unsure about what they wanted to do after completing Year 12 and that deciding on what they wanted to do for the rest of their lives is a "big decision".

Current research highlights that a lack of preparation for tertiary education is one of the major influences on participation in higher education.11 Preparing students adequately for tertiary education during high school can assist in increasing student's attainment of a bachelor degree.12 However a lack of preparation does not appear to be the case for students in the La Trobe study, who reported that schools provide them with "a lot of support" as well as assistance with "study methods" which students felt assisted in easing their fears about higher education. Whilst students felt prepared for higher education some students feared that university would be "very hard".

**Occupational exposure**

Teachers reported that students in rural areas experience a lack of exposure to a variety of occupations compared with their metropolitan counterparts. Teachers reported that students in the region were "lacking in role models" which may influence their decision to go on to higher education. They also report that students are not exposed to a variety of occupations and therefore students may be more inclined to undertake careers based on what they see locally and may not be aware of "a lot of those possibilities" or that there are other options that "would be better suited to them". A lack of exposure to a variety of occupations and role models may contribute to students considering themselves to be unprepared to choose a university course upon leaving secondary school.13

Teachers reported offering work experience programs with local and metropolitan businesses as well as local careers expos which are reported to have been "beneficial" in increasing students' exposure to a variety of occupations and options that are available to them after completing high school. Students describe the work experience program as "heaps of fun" and assisted them in making a decision about their career path; "after I did that work experience it did make me realise what I wanted to do" (student's comments).

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10 Ibid.
Finding out about higher education

Students and teachers identified a number of issues in relation to how they obtain information about higher education including the sources of information about universities and TAFE and the courses and services they offer schools and students.

Careers teachers

Teachers had varied levels of experience as career advisors with some having extensive experience in the position, whilst one teacher reported being in their first year of teaching and that being "thrown" in to the position meant they were not well prepared for the task.

Rural schools are often smaller in size, can be more isolated and have fewer specialised staff which often result in teachers having various responsibilities and can increase issues of preparing students for higher education. Whilst most teachers reported that their role as careers advisors was in addition to their role as a classroom teacher, one careers teacher was employed part-time solely as careers advisor without any teaching responsibilities. Teachers in rural schools undertake a "myriad" of roles within their position as careers teachers and within the school. Careers teachers also work in collaboration with other career program coordinators including coordinators from Managed Individual Pathways (MIP), Local Learning and Employment Network as well as employers for students in the Vocational Education and Training Program and prospective work experience providers.

Some teachers had little or no formal qualifications in career guidance and most of their professional development was "experience". They did however, report being members of professional organisations and attending conferences and seminars in order to increase their skills. However, some find it difficult getting "time out" to undertake professional development. Travelling to attend professional development activities can be a barrier for some careers teachers, with some preferring to have professional development options available online. Some reported that their school and other staff members were extremely supportive of them in their role as careers advisor and in their professional development.

One of the barriers that careers teachers reported is the limited resources and support of being in a small school and that careers education is not always a priority for some schools. Despite knowing that other schools "do it better", teachers consider that they were still able to provide a "good service" for their students. Other barriers to being in a small school included having multiple roles and responsibilities, and not being given time release for other roles and personal commitments. Keeping up-to-date with the overabundance of materials was "time consuming" and required teachers putting in time in being "properly prepared" and not necessarily being able to provide students with information straight away.

Some of the advantages of being from a smaller school included having a "fully functioning" room dedicated to careers education. Having smaller student numbers makes it easier for careers teachers to disseminate information to students and also means that they know the career aspiration of all of their students, something which would not be possible at larger schools. Teachers felt that by being a part of a smaller school meant they were able to provide a better service to students.

Open days

Open days are a good source of information for students. Students attend open days at a number of universities in order to find out about courses, accommodation, financial advice and expectations of higher education. Some students who were intending to go

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interstate to undertake higher education studies did not attend open days and were therefore “unsure” about what to expect.

The distance to attend open days can be an “effort” and some students may not be “bothered” because they are too far away. Teachers reported that if students lived in Melbourne they may be more inclined to attend open days and that rural students are more likely to attend open days at regional universities.

**University information sessions**

Information sessions conducted by higher education institutions such as Orientation Week and A day in the life program (a La Trobe University program) as well as face-to-face visits from institutions’ representatives are sources of information for both teachers and students. Students reported parents wanting to “help more”, with one student stating “I just think parents should know as much about it as I should”. Information sessions held at schools were run during school hours, with some students reporting that parents were not invited. Students suggested running university information sessions after school so that parents could attend.

Whilst teachers receive information from universities about orientation days and other information sessions they feel that “motivation” along with distance and the time and costs of travelling can be barriers to students attending these sessions. Again teachers felt that if students were in Melbourne they could attend these sessions without any financial costs or without taking time out of school.

**Research report summary**

This research has shown that many of the factors which influence a student’s decision to participate in higher education appear to be interrelated. It appears that very few of these issues stand alone and many of the students express concern over a number of these factors. As indicated above, common factors which can influence participation in higher education include, but are not limited to, financial issues. Issues associated with transport, accommodation and employment also need to be considered when addressing participation.

Fostering parental support by ensuring parents are well informed of the demands and needs of higher education can help facilitate parental support and encourage students to access higher education.

**Student finances**

Undoubtedly you will receive numerous submissions relating to the financial burden placed on students at university level. Please find enclosed a research report entitled **“Student Finances at La Trobe University”** which you may find useful as it shows the stresses endured by many students at La Trobe in trying to support themselves on a week to week basis.

**Impact of drought on rural and isolated students**

The longevity of the current drought situation has undoubtedly had a significant impact on students in rural and isolated areas. A research study undertaken by Alston and Kent (2006) entitled: The impact of drought on secondary education access in Australia’s rural and remote areas may be of particular interest to the Parliamentary Review. The key findings of this research in relation to tertiary access have been identified as follows:

At **TAFE level** young people in their study report:
- a lack of access to TAFE campuses;
- the need to travel some distance for training;
- a lack of public transport to facilitate their access;
- the need for high levels of parental support to access courses;
- lack of access to living away from home allowance;
- for remote young people, the need to live at a distance from home.
At university level young people in their study report:

- a lack of access to Youth Allowance because of means-testing on parental assets;
- financial difficulties associated with parents being asset rich and income poor;
- many families being unable to support their young people away from home;
- an increased need for them to delay their entry to university in an attempt to earn the required amount to be classified as independent for the purposes of Youth Allowance;
- the lack of unskilled full-time employment in their towns as a result of drought making the earning of this money difficult or impossible;
- anecdotal evidence that some give up their university places because of financial pressures;
- for those who do go away, the need to work to try and support themselves while at university;
- anecdotal evidence that some drop out from university because of financial and emotional pressures;
- anecdotal evidence that rural and remote young people choose a regional university over a capital city because of cheaper costs of living;
- the need to choose shorter courses to relieve the family’s financial burden and/or allow younger siblings access; and
- for those where there is more than one child hoping to go to university, offering not to go, or being unable to go because of family financial pressures.\(^\text{15}\)

As indicated by Alston and Kent, the greatest cause of educational disadvantage is low income and for many families living in rural or isolated areas, the drought has adversely impacted on their ability to afford education.\(^\text{16}\)

**Inquiry question 2: Current policies and programs that help to support students from specific geographic locations to remain at university and complete their studies**

La Trobe University has a number of programs in place to attract and support students from rural and isolated areas. The following are some examples of the current programs which in part address some of the barriers identified in the La Trobe research study discussed above:

**Scholarships**

As you may be aware, the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) provide a number of Commonwealth Scholarships to approved higher education providers.

The Commonwealth Scholarships (CS) are available to commencing and continuing undergraduate students who are Australian citizens or holders of Australian permanent humanitarian visas. The CS provide assistance to full-time low income students, rural and regional low income students, and Indigenous students with financial support associated with their study in an undergraduate program.

\(^\text{15}\) Alston, M., & Kent, J. (2006). *The impact of drought on secondary education access in Australia’s rural and remote areas*. Wagga Wagga, NSW, Centre for Rural Social Research, Charles Sturt University: p18

\(^\text{16}\) Ibid: p179
There are two major types of CS:

- Commonwealth Education Costs Scholarships (CECS) valued at $2,162 per year (indexed) up to a maximum four years. This scholarship is awarded to eligible students to assist with their education costs.

- Commonwealth Accommodation Scholarships (CAS) valued at $4,324 per year (indexed) up to a maximum four years. The CAS is awarded to rural and isolated students who are required to move away from their home to undertake their study.

The main objectives of Commonwealth Scholarships program are:

- to facilitate choice in higher education;
- to increase higher education participation; and
- to provide a measure of financial support for students from low socio-economic backgrounds.

In recognition of the need to assist Indigenous Australians to further access higher education, two additional measures were developed in 2008 by the Commonwealth to meet this objective. These are:

- 1,000 Indigenous Access Scholarships offered to Indigenous students, particularly those who need to relocate from rural and remote areas to enable them to access an undergraduate course or an eligible enabling course. Each scholarship was valued at $4,080 in 2008; and

- 910 Indigenous Enabling Scholarships to provide up to an additional year of scholarship funding for Indigenous students to undertake an enabling course as a pathway into higher education. These scholarships are valued in 2008 at $2,162 for an education costs scholarship, and $4,324 for an accommodation costs scholarship.

For further information regarding the Commonwealth Scholarship Program please refer to:


As you will see from the table below, the University also has a number of other scholarship/grants available to assist rural and isolated students.
Table 1: Equity Scholarships at La Trobe University

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scholarship/Grant</th>
<th>Assistance</th>
<th>Target Group</th>
<th>No. in 2007*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>La Trobe Study Support</td>
<td>$3,000</td>
<td>3-4 years</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La Trobe Indigenous Student</td>
<td>$5,000</td>
<td>3-4 years</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La Trobe Vice Chancellors Regional</td>
<td>$3,000</td>
<td>3-4 years</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honours Year Grant</td>
<td>$1,000-2,000</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Les Kilmartin</td>
<td>$500</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dept. of Human Services</td>
<td>$6,800</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gwen Saunders Memorial</td>
<td>$500</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R.E. McFarwe Memorial</td>
<td>$3,000</td>
<td>3-4 years</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa Malone</td>
<td>$2,000</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evan Patulock Memorial</td>
<td>$1,500</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrea Hore Business</td>
<td>$2,000</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chisholm College Accommodation</td>
<td>$2,500</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chisholm College Accommodation</td>
<td>$5,000</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Menzies College Regional</td>
<td>$1,000</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residential Services</td>
<td>$600 - $1,200</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bendigo Anniversary Foundation</td>
<td>$1,500</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bendigo United Friendly Societies</td>
<td>$6,500</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City of Bendigo Civil Engineering</td>
<td>$6,250**</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coliban Water Civil Engineering</td>
<td>$3,000</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coomies Consulting Group</td>
<td>$11,000**</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NorthEast Water</td>
<td>$10,000**</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deans Scholarship</td>
<td>$6,000</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grampians Wimmera Mallee Water</td>
<td>$10,000**</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VicRoads Civil Engineering</td>
<td>$6,500**</td>
<td>2-3 years</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goulburn Murray Water</td>
<td>$11,000**</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SJF Consulting Civil Engineering</td>
<td>$6,000**</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shire of Campaspe Civil Engineering</td>
<td>$11,000**</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Murray Irrigation Civil Engineering</td>
<td>$10,000**</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colleambula Irrigation Civil Eng.</td>
<td>$10,500**</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Millo Darveniza Engineering</td>
<td>$3,000</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health Science Lincoln Award</td>
<td>$1,000</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sport &amp; Tourism Youth Foundation</td>
<td>$1,000</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FRRR/Pratt Water Engineering Cadetship</td>
<td>$5,000**</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City of Wangaratta Civil Engineering</td>
<td>$5,000**</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* commencing scholarships only, pipeline scholarships not included
** includes $5,000 paid vacation work per year

Rural and Regional Student Access Scheme (RRSAS)

La Trobe University developed this scheme to encourage students who have completed their VCE (or HSC in NSW) at a rural/regional school to take up tertiary studies at one of our regional campuses. All schools that are not in the Melbourne metropolitan or Geelong areas, or similar areas of New South Wales are included in the RRSAS.

The RRSAS provides an automatic three ENTER points bonus which will be applied to applicants whose ENTER score is just a little below the desired ENTER for a particular course. The aim of the RRSAS is to encourage rural/regional students to stay in regional areas, thereby building capacity and knowledge growth for regional areas.

This scheme allows the University to meet its stated mission/objectives by ensuring regional communities benefit from rural and regional students being exposed to teaching, learning and research in a regional setting. This promotes potential sustainable knowledge growth for the regional communities served by La Trobe University.
Special Entry and Access Scheme (SEAS) – Rural and Isolated Category

The SEAS scheme is for students who have suffered educational disadvantage as a result of either undertaking their secondary schooling in a rural or isolated area and/or are required to move from such an area to undertake the tertiary course of their choice.

The types of educational disadvantage that this scheme seeks to address include a limited range of Yr 12 subjects compared with metropolitan schools; and the need for rural high school teachers to teach in some areas where they lack expertise because of difficulties in attracting appropriate staff to rural schools.

Schools Access La Trobe (SALT): A program for under-represented schools

This is a pilot program which commenced in 2007 and targets high schools which are either located in a low socio-economic postcode area, or have less than 50% of their Year 12 cohort going on to university. There are 109 high schools involved in the SALT program, including 50 high schools in non-metropolitan locations. This program does not require students to achieve a specified ENTER score in order to apply for a university course. Instead the university relies on a recommendation from the Year 12 co-ordinator as well as a written statement from the student which explains their reasons for applying for a particular course.

Targeted accommodation scholarships

A small number of accommodation scholarships are available exclusively for rural students in their first year of University study. These scholarships are for students living in on-campus residential accommodation and are valued at $1,000. There is also a wider range of on-campus accommodation subsidies for which first year rural students could apply, but which are not limited to rural students.
**Equity grants for outreach and support programs**
The University has a number of outreach and other programs in place to attract and support students. The following are some examples of the types of projects that are specifically aimed at equity groups but will nevertheless have benefits to other students.

**Table 2: Examples of Equity Grants allocated in 2007**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Project Title</th>
<th>Brief Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>'A project to subsidise transport for under-represented students to attend Open Day at Bendigo.'</td>
<td>This project aims to enable senior secondary students in rural/isolated areas and from low SES backgrounds to attend Open Day at Bendigo by providing subsidised transport. The project aims to improve access for regional and remote students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'Improving scientific writing skills of students from a non-English speaking background in First Year Biology.'</td>
<td>The aim of this project is to improve the scientific writing skills of first year NESB students through the implementation of an integrated First Year program and the production of a First Year Biology Communication Skills Manual. This document will provide objectives and learning outcomes; the pathway of learning; and a guide to expected styles, formats and referencing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'Production of a subtitled, online virtual tours (Melbourne Wildlife Sanctuary, Melbourne Botanic Gardens) (aiding hearing, mobility impaired and NESB students).'</td>
<td>The project will provide a subtitled, online (via WebCT) virtual tour as a learning aid to supplement field excursions for first year Plant Sciences (BIO1PS) students. The project will provide an online map with links to photos and video of plants on the tour. The online virtual tour will be subtitled to aid in the understanding of the descriptions of the plants presented and enable students to revisit the site at their own pace.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'e-Mentoring to inspire female secondary school students to proceed to study and careers in Information Technology &amp; Engineering.'</td>
<td>The project involves an e-Mentoring program where female university students and alumni working in Information Technology and Electronic Engineering, serve as mentors for female secondary school students in years 10, 11 and 12. The aim of the project is to encourage participation of women in fields of Information Technology or Electronic Engineering.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A pilot transition program for first year students attending the Shepparton Campus (predominantly rural and low SES students).</td>
<td>This project will provide a structured transition program and also make provision for addressing identified challenges facing particular equity groups. Using a variety of teaching and learning approaches the program will focus on necessary requirements for university study e.g. computer and communication skills. Shepparton-specific materials particularly a CD will be developed to complement face to face delivery and assist student learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remote Access to Information Project - providing information on University student support services to students in rurally isolated areas of southern NSW.</td>
<td>To improve access for HSC students from isolated areas of south western NSW by the provision of accessible information on the internet about the student accommodation and support services available at Albury-Wodonga campus. Students and their parents will then be in a better position to make informed decisions about enrolling and studying at the campus.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project Description</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Albury Wodonga Travel and Accommodation Subsidy Scheme for rural and low SES students.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This project will provide a transport and accommodation subsidy to Career Advisers in targeted remote</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>high schools of the Albury Wodonga catchment area. It will also offer a travel subsidy to targeted</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>high schools from Low SES or rural areas in Albury/Wodonga catchment to encourage prospective</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>student attendance at on-campus activities.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel Subsidy Scheme for Bundoora catchment areas to assist rural and low SES students.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This project will target rural and Low SES high schools that are participating in the pilot program</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'Schools Access La Trobe' for underrepresented schools. The travel subsidy aims to encourage</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>prospective student attendance at on-campus activities.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staying the Course: the importance of social and structural networks for NESB students' achieving</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>positive outcomes in a regional campus.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exploratory research to investigate ways of identifying barriers, providing pathways to university</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and supporting NESB students studying at a small regional campus.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Engagement Initiatives in association with the Shepparton Students' Association.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This project seeks to increase student engagement of rural and low SES students at Shepparton</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>campus, via orientation, transition, social and sporting programs.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Migrating to Uni: Developing a support network for NESB students at Bundoora campus.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The aim of this project is to strengthen the capacity of the University community to respond to the</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>needs of NESB students through enhanced staff awareness of the challenges faced by NESB students;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the development of clear and comprehensive pathways to support NESB students; and the</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>identification and development of targeted support activities for future implementation.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Engagement Initiatives in association with the Mildura Students' Association.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This project seeks to increase student engagement of rural and Low SES students at Mildura campus,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>via orientation, transition, social and sporting programs.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health and wellness in the context of sexuality and relationship.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This project aims to assist equity group students living in University residential colleges to</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>improve their understanding of sexuality and sexual health and safety.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

You will note that some of these projects focus on issues raised in the La Trobe research study discussed earlier.

**Student engagement**

The University has identified what its strategies will be over the next five years. One initiative is the La Trobe University's Student Engagement Strategy which will look at building and enhancing links between current university students and high school students through mentoring and volunteering within local schools and community organisations. This is aimed at raising the aspirations and confidence of regional school students and creating a closer connection between schools and the university generally. Universities have the capacity to raise awareness and develop an appreciation for lifelong learning within their communities, particularly amongst school students who may be inclined towards work or TAFE studies in the short term, but who are well suited to
attend university later in life. Pathways between Universities and TAFE, schools and on
the job training have a positive outcome in engaging young people in learning for life.

A first year experience strategy is also being developed across La Trobe’s regional
campuses to prepare and support incoming students during their transition from school
to university. This will include academic and social support, as well as providing parents
and carers with an understanding of the university experience, and strategies to support
their children through it.

**International comparisons**

There is a burgeoning international research focus on equity and access for all people
irrespective of their background and some of the programs that are being introduced in
other countries are more advanced than what is currently being undertaken in Australia.

However, I would like to briefly draw the Committee’s attention to the research and
subsequent public policy development around access to higher education from under-
represented groups being undertaken in Canada.

The Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation has undertaken significant research in
this area. The Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation is a private, independent
organisation created by an act of Parliament in 1998. This research shows that barriers to
education by under-represented groups are not unlike the barriers faced by students in
the Australian context.\(^\text{17}\) This study states that:

> As the economy continues to evolve, more and more post-secondary
> graduates are needed to ensure that Canada has access to the human capital
> – the practical skills, the ability to innovate, and the knowledge – it needs to
> remain prosperous and competitive. This need for more graduates comes as
> we approach the time when the number of young people in the population
> will begin to decline.\(^\text{18}\)

Canada is made up of 13 provinces with a total population of about 33 million people.
Although this Canadian research does not directly relate to matters associated with rural
and isolated students, it is worth noting the research that is being undertaken to
encourage students to either remain in their home province or provide incentives for
students to return to their province following graduation.

The Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation has a number of pilot projects underway.
The *Future to Discover* is a joint project by the governments of New Brunswick and
Manitoba and the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation. The project has two
components: **Explore Your Horizons** which helps students to understand the range of
occupational and post-secondary choices and make meaningful decisions about their
futures; **Learning Outcomes** supports project participants who face financial obstacles
to post-secondary education by providing an incentive of $8,000, deposited into a trust
account that can be accessed upon successful completion of high school and enrolment
in an accredited post-secondary institution. This second component is only available to
students in New Brunswick and is available to students from families with incomes below
the provincial median.\(^\text{19}\)

Montreal, Canadian Millennium Scholarship Foundation.

\(^\text{18}\) Ibid., p. 7

\(^\text{19}\) Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation: http://www.millenniumscholarships.ca/en/research/ppFTD.asp
The influence of parents is critical to the aspirations of students. Evidence suggests that the level of parents’ communication and encouragement of their children’s learning contributes to learning outcomes. Whilst it may not be the case for all children there will be some children from disadvantaged backgrounds that may not get such support due to a variety of reasons. The OECD has identified the values of “creating learning communities”. In this model the role of parents is seen as crucial to the education of their children, rather than “customers in a competitive market”. This model stresses the fact that parents can help teachers understand the behaviour and needs of their children and thus makes teaching more effective. Further, “parents can also contribute with their own diverse skills, which are often valuable complements to those of teachers”. The role of the school is thus defined:

“as a resource centre for the development of the local community, which means that it gives all stakeholders, including parents, a sense of ownership and aims to respond in a flexible way to their needs”.

Under this model, employers are seen to also have an important role. It is suggested in this research, that “education authorities could encourage employer support for working parents through awards for community development or possibly through tax relief for firms which provide verified employer support over a designated period of time”.

In summary

Working with students and their parents at the secondary school level is an important aspect of encouraging students to undertake higher education. Incentives for students to stay in their rural surroundings should be considered as well as incentives for students from metropolitan areas to move to regional areas once they graduate. Arguably, the allied health sector in rural and isolated areas is one area where demand for such services far outweighs the supply. Payment of a student’s HECS debt for part or all of their degree is one such incentive for a student to work in rural areas for a specified period of time.

Universities already provide a number of outreach opportunities to assist students from under-represented groups to continue on to higher education to improve the access, retention, participation and success of these groups. This is an ongoing commitment by the University.

I trust that you find this information useful and I would be happy to elaborate further on any aspect of this submission.

Stephanie Chard
Manager
Equity and Access Unit

20 Field, S., Kuczera, M., Pont, B. (2007). No more failures: Ten steps to equity in Education OECD: p. 100
21 Ibid. p. 106
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid.