Response to the inquiry into geographical differences in the rate in which Victorian students participate in higher education

The following response is a summary of points raised in group discussion with members of the Frankston Learning City network. The format will respond separately to each issue raised by the parliamentary inquiry.

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

Discussion:

- Frankston and Mornington Peninsula (FMP) regional statistics suggest that rates of tertiary acceptance are closer to rural than metro figures.
- Tertiary aspirations are lower in this region for a number of reasons, e.g. larger proportion of trades, and small business enterprises; low parental aspirations for their children; and fewer role models e.g. less people in the region have completed tertiary education
- Lack of direct link from tertiary course to an appropriate job for some industries
- Gen Y are not interested in ‘one way’ of studying e.g. they are seeking increased flexibility, online options.
- Marginalisation for public system students attending a university in Melbourne e.g. friendship networks, geographical distance from home, financial pressure of long travel times or living away from home.
- High enter scores are a barrier for students for some universities with regional campuses
- Supports for regional students, e.g. some students are asking for support from their secondary school rather than using tertiary support services (Uni seems too big and overwhelming for some of them)
- Poor transport options may force a student to live away from home when they don’t wish to
- FMP region is a geographically great place to grow up and live, some students don’t want to leave the ‘lifestyle’ to attend university in the city.
- Increased number of deferred courses due to lack of financial resources for students

Possible actions:
- Research and promote a variety of entrance points or pathways to tertiary education
- Regional campuses to offer increased variety of courses
- Review entry level scores criteria to increase flexibility for regional campuses

**b/. Influences of school retention rates, including enrolments and completions for VCE, VCAL and VET in schools on participation in higher education:**

*Discussion:*
- Increase in VET/VCAL participations within schools and increase in FMP schools offering VET/VCAL
- There is a relationship between VET/VCAL pathways and the transition into part-time work and into apprenticeships
- Anecdotal evidence that VET/VCAL are assisting students to remain at school longer
- Experience of VET/VCAL does not necessarily lead to a vocation for students, with the exception of Hospitality and mechanics
- Financial cost of VET is a barrier to some students
- Increased difficulty attracting and retaining VET teachers

**Possible actions:**
- Collaborative arrangements between universities, Chisholm, schools and other providers to improve pathways for students
- Whole school approach to employment – greater vocational and life-skills focus in school curriculum
- Increase students access to ‘role models’ from the workforce
- Increase students ‘work experiences’ in real work places
- Increase school collaboration in clusters to provide the variety of VET/VCAL options e.g. not every school trying to offer everything
- Share VET staff across schools
- Research and improve the VET model, e.g. funding, staffing, logistics, and how it fits within the broader systems
- School based new apprentices model needs reviewing, e.g. funding, staffing, logistics, and how it fits within the broader systems

**c/. Influences of participation in other post-school pathways, including TAFE enrolments and take up of apprenticeships or other employment opportunities, on participation in higher education:**

*Discussion:*
- FMP region has a high proportion of trades and small businesses as role models for students
- Increased need for skilled labour in the region attracts students
• Chisholm enrolments continue to increase every year and are currently triple Monash university enrolments
• FMP region has identified skills gaps that the region is working towards addressing e.g. raising student’s awareness of skill gaps to increase student’s interest
• Students of other higher education pathways are deferring for financial reasons

Possible actions:
• Collaborative arrangements between universities, Chisholm, schools and other providers to improve pathways for students
• Whole school approach to employment – greater vocational and life-skills focus in school curriculum

d/. Potential geographic, economic, social, cultural and other influences on university applications, offers, acceptances and completions across Victorian Communities:

Discussion:
• All of the above listed factors influence tertiary education options for students in the FMP region
• Geographic – lack of effective and low cost transport; attractive regional lifestyle (don’t wish to go to city); close to support networks (family, friends)
• Economic – financial constraints on regional students, e.g. travel, accommodation, capacity to gain part-time work when large hours in transit
• Social – friendship networks more difficult to develop; private vs. public school – social acceptance
• Cultural – difference between city lifestyle and regional and rural lifestyles which requires further adjustment for regional and rural students.

Possible actions:
• Tertiary study completed within smaller ‘learning hubs’ in many geographical locations across the State e.g. utilising school facilities after-hours, utilising public libraries. These might be like correspondence courses where the lecturer visits once in three - six months but the class meets weekly
• Review Youth Guarantee e.g. is it fair for middle Australia?
• Explore low or no cost transport options for students
• Explore low cost accommodation models that are flexible e.g. Student A uses room for 2 days per week, Student B uses room for 3 days per week
• Outreach – For regional and rural students find ways to bring the courses to the students rather than bringing the students to the city
Advantages and disadvantages of participation and non-participation in higher education for school leavers and their families and communities in different metropolitan, rural and regional areas:

Discussion:

- Research has shown us that students who remain at secondary college until year 12 have better employment choices and opportunities, largely because they are more socially and emotionally mature at 18 years than 16 years, and so are more likely to retain a job.
- Labour market, in part, drives the need for various occupations. Currently we have identified regional skills gaps and are also cognizant of national skills gaps. Whilst this points to a number of professional careers - teachers, nurses, engineers, it also highlights skills-based careers, plumbing, hairdressing.
- High regional employment in skills-based careers is likely to influence the number of students who are attracted to these jobs. This may result in reduced numbers attending tertiary education. In the current labour market this may not be seen as a problem, however do these factors contribute to limiting the choices for students in this region?

Possible actions:

- Review regional, rural and suburban areas to determine if higher education choices are influenced significantly by local labour market, national labour market, global labour market; parental employment and aspiration; geographical opportunities; and perceived or real barriers to travel to another place to study.
- All key stakeholders (schools, training organisation, tertiary institutions) have access to local and national labour market trends to assist students with their future choices.
- Investigate the impact of a “gap” year whereby students might have the opportunity to work, travel, and have other life experiences before deciding on the next educational pathway.

Potential effects of geographical differences in participation in higher education on skills shortages and the Victorian economy:

Discussion:

- The closure of Technical schools significantly reduced the number of students seeking a career in a trade for approx. 10 years.
- VET and VCAL are an attempt to address this issue, however it will take a number of years to realise the effects of these programs.
- Chisholm Institute continues to have strong enrolment in skills-based courses within FMP region, however there are concerns that not all courses lead to jobs.
- One of the difficulties for local sole owner employers is the
financial risk of taking on an apprentice e.g. plumbing, electrician. While this has shifted in recent years due to the increased building market, the current economic environment does not lend towards businesses taking risks with employees.

Strategies to address any barriers contributing to geographical differences in participation in higher education:
The following list provides suggestions that may assist in addressing the geographical differences in higher education, and to also address other higher education issues more broadly:

- New models of transport, e.g. alternate fee structure on public transport - Students/ apprentices/ trainees to travel for free or low cost
- Low entry Tertiary institutions to be represented in regional and rural areas
- Fairer Victoria review: FMP region rezoned as metro which resulted in removing any financial assistance for students e.g. travel, accommodation, and yet FMP region statistics align more closely with rural statistics.
- New models of accommodation e.g. students share rooms if they are travelling to Melbourne for a few days for Uni
- Youth Allowance criteria to be reviewed e.g. financial assistance for students living away from home
- VET and VCAL models to be reviewed, with attention to funding, staffing, logistics, equipment within regions
- Increase regional scholarships
- Review of HECS in light of increased living/ travel/ study costs for non-metro students
- Increased capacity for secondary and tertiary education to view education within the range of vocational outcomes for students, e.g. increased work experience opportunities, employers connected with students
- Secondary and tertiary institutions to partner in delivering higher educational outcomes, e.g. shared resources, facilities, equipment, staff
- Identify and develop local ‘learning hubs’: local multipurpose facilities (schools, public libraries, neighbourhood centres) using current and future technology to deliver learning via the internet, electronic whiteboards and large screens. E.g. a lecturer could be teaching from one venue and streaming into others all over the State (Some schools and tertiary institutions are already using this technology)
- Learning hubs might also be used for students to gather who have chosen to study via correspondence/ distance education to improve social connections and support in regions.

The Frankston Learning City Network would be happy to discuss any of these suggestions more fully at a later stage.