Gippsland Local Government Network

Submission to the Inquiry into Geographical Differences in the rate in which Victorian Students participate in Higher Education.

April 2008
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Introduction

Participation in higher education provides people with greater choice and flexibility in their career and life paths. The Gippsland region has a substantially lower higher education participation rate than that of metropolitan Melbourne. The following submission concentrates on the reasons why many Gippsland students choose not to participate in higher education and suggests a number of strategies to improve this situation. For clarity, these have been organised into two categories: barriers and solutions.

Barriers

The major barriers to Gippsland students participating in higher education are:
- Inadequate public transport
- Distance from tertiary institutions
- Cost of participating in higher education
- Relocation
- Limited range of locally available tertiary courses

Inadequate public transport

The lack of frequent, reliable public transport is one of the major deterrents for many Gippsland students wishing to undertake tertiary studies. The majority of public transport services available in Gippsland do not coordinate with the timetables of major educational institutions nor do they operate during peak times.

For many students living in regional Gippsland, relying on the existing public transport system would result in them being unable to attend morning lectures and therefore unable to participate in full-time study. This in turn severely limits the range of courses available, as not all modalities are offered on a part-time basis. This is a problem that affects students attending country as well as metropolitan institutions.

In some parts of Gippsland, the situation is exacerbated with many communities having no access to public transport at all. This makes it extremely difficult for students to utilise those services that are available at the regional centres. To compound matters, once a student arrives at a regional centre, there are often no connecting services to the university or TAFE campuses leaving the student stranded or forced to pay for a private taxi.

Distance from tertiary institutions

The regional alternative to attending a metropolitan university is the Gippsland campus of Monash University, which is located at Churchill. Although ideally situated for those residing in the City of Latrobe, an average distance of 100km and a travel time of more than two hours acts as a major deterrent for the majority of Gippsland students.

Cost of participating in higher education

Participation in higher education is expensive. Course fees, books, accommodation, food, utilities, clothing, entertainment and travel expenses have been estimated to cost the average regional student around $20,000 per year. For many Gippsland students this is simply too much.
The average household income in rural and regional parts of Gippsland such as Bass Coast and Wellington Shires is substantially lower compared to their Melbourne counterparts. According to the 2006 Census, the difference between the average taxable income of a person living in Melbourne and a person living in Gippsland is more than $15,000. Many families are unable to cope with the additional financial burden of supporting a university student. It is not uncommon for a university student to find themselves juggling multiple jobs while studying full-time just to make ends meet. This factor alone plays a large part in the decision not to undertake higher education.

The escalating cost of HECS is another serious de-motivating factor for students considering tertiary study. The prospect of working part or full-time, to support yourself while studying for three to five years, only to be burdened with a huge government debt at the end is just too much for many students to bear.

**Relocation**

For many students, relocation is the only option to deal with the geographical isolation, lack of accessible public transport and high cost of tertiary studies. Rural students who have relocated to metropolitan areas are often isolated from their family and social network. Being part of a social network plays an important role in shaping and defining a person’s identity and personality. The apprehension associated with having to abandon one’s circle of friends coupled with the uncertainty of being accepted into a new network can greatly influence whether or not a student decides to pursue tertiary education.

Relocation also poses an additional problem for Gippsland. The vast majority of students aged between 20 – 24 who relocate in order to study, do not return once their education is complete. This further exacerbates the existing regional skills shortage and ageing population.

**Limited range of locally available tertiary courses**

The range of available higher education opportunities in Gippsland is limited. The number of courses offered, the resources available and the lower ENTER score required tend to be a significant deterrent for many people considering tertiary study.

Monash University’s Gippsland campus at Churchill offers the largest range of courses, however, the lengthy travel time required still places it out of reach for many Gippsland students.
Solutions

Inadequate public transport
GLGN recommends the existing regional public transport system be improved by providing increased regular bus services connecting smaller communities to regional centres.

GLGN also recommends providing additional train and bus services between the major regional centres and the city. The services need to occur more frequently and coordinate with the major metropolitan universities to ensure that a student travelling from Gippsland, is able to arrive in Melbourne with sufficient time to attend their morning lectures. There also needs to be enough services available to enable students to return home safely in the evening.

To encourage more students to attend regional campuses, GLGN recommends the public transport system be improved by providing additional morning and afternoon services both to and from the city to better respond to demand. The addition of integrated bus services from rail stations to tertiary campuses would further encourage students to utilise the public transport system.

Distance from tertiary institutions
GLGN recommends that the major metropolitan universities and TAFEs are encouraged to:
- Expand their existing regional campuses; and
- Open additional campuses in Gippsland with State and Federal Government support.

Cost of participating in higher education
GLGN recommends the State Government:
- Provide better access to scholarships that make a significant contribution to living costs.
- Reassess the way Youth Allowance is paid to recognise those students who have had to move away from home in order to study but are currently classified as dependent due to their age.
- Encourage greater flexibility with the way students are able to attend lectures. For example: Increased reliance on online learning and improved access to out-reach services for students in remote areas. This would dramatically reduce the number of direct contact hours required and slash travel costs.
- Encourage the creation of alternative course structures with some units being offered in high-intensity blocks rather than the traditional one hour per day/five days a week.
- Encourage and support educational institutions to provide onsite affordable-rental accommodation for students from remote areas.

Relocation
GLGN recommends that the State Government consider providing an allowance or lump-sum grant to assist regional students relocating for higher education purposes.

Limited range of locally available tertiary courses
Quality higher education facilities need to be encouraged and developed in Gippsland. GLGN again recommends that the major metropolitan universities and TAFEs be encouraged to open regional campuses in Gippsland with State and Federal Government support.