20th March, 2008

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

Email: etc@parliament.vic.gov.au

Dear Ms Ellingford

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

I refer to the letter from Mr Geoff Howard, MP, inviting comment on this inquiry.

The following initial comment is hereby made in relation to the rate in which Victorian students participate in higher education, particularly from the perspective of the Wimmera region in north western Victoria.

1. A key factor in the lower incidence of participation by students from regional and isolated areas is the huge cost impost confronting such students in attendance of studies away from their home. Obviously such accommodation, travel and communication costs do not occur for most city students who can continue to live at home due to close proximity to their campuses. These costs present a significant barrier to students and families in regional and isolated areas.

2. Associated with this cost factor, it is likely that students from regional and isolated areas would be for more likely to defer or have a gap year to try to earn the required $18,000 prior to entering into their further studies so as to gain their independence and therefore access to Centrelink support. This situation is rather ironic as students who may wish to continue straight on from secondary school are encouraged not to by this system so as to be more financially sustainable during their further education.

3. A further limiting factor that is encountered by regional students in relocating to cities is the need to adapt to what can be a significant cultural change in their environment. Obviously the environment in smaller towns and areas is vastly different to that of Melbourne or major regional centres and, coupled with the necessity of leaving home, family and friends can be very daunting.

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4. The lack of public transport in regional areas must also be a barrier to students accessing higher education as opposed to their city counterparts. Systems such as the VET school bus network in the Wimmera are to be commended in alleviating this issue to a small degree. Nonetheless, public transport access from rural areas to regional cities, and between regional cities are often very limited.

5. The Vocational Education Training programs being delivered by secondary schools are an excellent innovation and serve to introduce students to a variety of employment options. Similarly, the operations of Local Learning Employment Networks are very important in providing students with exposure to vocational and career opportunities within the local region. The VET and Llen programs are to be commended for this reason and warrant ongoing Government support.

The effectiveness of these programs is evidenced by the much higher than State average take up of apprenticeships by students in the Wimmera Southern Mallee region.

6. While the need to expose secondary students to the whole range of vocational opportunities has been identified, there still appears to be a propensity in the secondary school system to foster students into university placements which is often reflected in the assessment of a schools success, ie. reference to enter level scores achieved by students.

On behalf of Council we thank you for the opportunity to comment and trust these comments can receive your consideration.

Yours faithfully

TONY BAWDEN
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