Personal Background

Having lived in and attended primary and secondary school in a rural area, and currently in my second year at university, I know and understand the difficulties that can be experienced by rural students trying to access and complete tertiary education.

Every Victorian student should feel they have fair and realistic access to higher education. From achieving an offer to successfully completing a degree, higher education should be an option for any student with the desire. Unfortunately, for students in many of Victoria’s rural and regional areas this currently isn’t the case.

It should be a great cause of concern that as it stands, geographical location can mean a great deal when accessing higher education. In many instances, students from rural areas are being left behind and punished educationally based on where they live.

I have shared my personal experience in the hope that it will increase understanding and awareness of some of the basic issues associated with accessing tertiary education from a small high school in country Victoria.

Kate Leadbeater
School Captain – Yea High School (2005)
RMIT University Student
Applying, receiving and accepting offers

Attending high school in a regional area presents a number of challenges in terms of applying for university. Open days offer a great range of information about courses and options, however it can be almost impossible to attend any of the relevant open days when located so far from the campuses. There are also so many beneficial study sessions and workshops held in Melbourne in the lead up to VCE exams. Unfortunately, students at my high school were rarely, if ever, able to access these sessions because of travel.

Faced with a smaller range of VCE subjects, the ability to access the best VCE subject load can be difficult. I studied two of my year 12 subjects via Distance Education which was certainly achievable but with definite disadvantages. The only face-to face teacher contact was accomplished by three or four workshops during the year, held in Melbourne.

Specialist teachers and resources for particular VCE subjects can also be lacking in regional high schools. Students studying equipment/practical based subjects such as sciences and health/human movement are often disadvantaged by a lack of access and thus experience with equipment and practical examples.

I received my university offer before the release of ENTER scores through the SNAP program at RMIT university. SNAP places are allocated on the basis of a separate application that feeds into the VTAC process at a later stage. In many instances, because of circumstances beyond their control, students at rural schools are not able to achieve the ENTER scores that they might have otherwise attained. Students at these schools should not be educational punished because of their geographical location.

Many people and organisations have highlighted the prevalence of rural students who defer their university offer. I was one of those students. For me, attending university meant relocating to Melbourne. I had never considered deferring until the end of year 12, when I was confronted with the task ahead. During 2006 I worked three jobs in an effort to save some money to facilitate my move to Melbourne in 2007. I also aimed to work enough to qualify as independent for Centrelink purposes. Unfortunately, despite having earned enough to qualify as independent at the commencement of my studies in 2007 I had to wait until the middle of the year before I was eligible for Youth Allowance.

Completing University

- **Housing**

One of the biggest challenges about attending university after living in a rural area is the need to move away from home. For many students this is the reality as their home town is simply too far from any university campus to consider commuting. There are also often transport barriers, with no public transport available from many regional towns (as with my home town of Kinglake).

In today’s rental market it is virtually impossible to find a house. As a student with a limited income and no or very little rental history the system is at no point working in your favor. The basic logistics of attending open for inspections from a rural area is a big set back. Currently there is no need for real estate agents to open houses more than once, as they are almost guaranteed to lease it out after one open. This means that you must attend opens whenever they are scheduled. As a result you can find yourself driving to Melbourne three or four times a week, often to inspect only one house per trip.

Commencing my second year of university in 2008 I have been lucky enough secure a house both last year and this year. However, in both instances this was the result of almost two months of searching and a huge investment of time and money.
• **Money**

Once a house is found cost becomes the next concern. The payment of the bond and first month’s rent requires a lump sum payment of between $1500 and $2000 at the start of each year. All utilities charge a connection fee for services, some of which near $100. I am currently sharing a house with another student and we pay $280 per week for a two bedroom house in Melbourne’s outer suburbs. My share of the rent equates to half of my monthly income, without considering bills, food, transport and costs associated with study.

Most universities advise students to work no more than 10 hours a week in order to get the best out of their studies. Unfortunately students paying for housing often have to work much more in order to meet their living costs. I work 16.5 hours per week and earn approx. $270. Unfortunately this amount is high enough to cut into my Youth Allowance entitlements cutting them down to approx. $188 per fortnight.

Despite being incredibly supportive of my chosen path my parents are not in a position to support me financially. While not everyone’s experience, I know this is the situation that many rural students are faced with.

Half way through 2007 I was lucky enough to be granted a Commonwealth Accommodation Scholarship which has been a great help in terms of meeting the costs of my accommodation. It is programs such as these that really support students moving from rural areas. Expansion of scholarship programs such as these would make a huge and important difference for students.

• **Studying**

The awarding of my SNAP place at RMIT University means I have a place in a course with a required ENTER 13 points higher than the ENTER I achieved. Despite this, I am incredibly pleased with my results that indicate I am achieving at a level as high or higher then the students who achieved the required ENTER score.

Across the State there are Year 12 students missing out on university places because they haven’t achieved the required ENTER. For students from rural and regional schools this can be a result of circumstances beyond their control. The success of students in the SNAP program shows that given the opportunity, these students have just as much, if not more, chance of success at university. Changes must be made to a system that is currently discriminating against students because of their geographical location.

**What does this mean for the future?**

There are so many students in rural areas, as with all regions, that have something to offer. With such a hard path to higher education, these students are being denied their right to pursue their passions. In many instances students with a past in a rural area will return to that area. Without accessible tertiary education these students cannot bring new skills and knowledge to the country. They can’t help to help to bridge the skills gap. They can’t learn about things that interest them. They can’t easily partake in something that for metropolitan students is practically a given and so much more accessible and realistic.

**What needs to be done?**

I believe there are a number of actions that can be taken to ensure that rural students are better able to access, complete and achieve university education in Victoria.

• The facilitation and encouragement of a support network between rural students at universities and rural high schools. Partnerships such as these would help to bridge the
knowledge and experience gap that is created by a lack of access to open days and course information sessions. This would need to build on from the current tertiary expo’s that tour regional areas to provide more of a personal partnership. For students at rural high schools to hear about a real person’s experience would provide a level of belief and expectation that is inherent in metropolitan high schools. This would also be a great opportunity to emphasis programs and scholarships that are particularly important for rural students. Often this information falls through the cracks, but hearing about the difference a scholarship has made from someone in a situation high school students can relate with would ensure the message was relevant.

- Replication of programs like SNAP across rural schools that are under-represented at the tertiary level. Unfortunately, it is impossible to think that rural schools with small classes will ever be able to provide the same level of VCE subject choice, practical learning experiences or specialist teachers as schools in metropolitan areas. However this doesn’t mean that students at these schools should have less of an opportunity to complete further study in their area of interest. Programs such as SNAP that require students to indicate their on-going level of interest and commitment to a particular study area helps to overcome the boundaries currently imposed by the ENTER system.

- Something must be done to ease the housing crisis and support students in their search for housing. Current systems are falling short and students are not in a position to compete in Melbourne’s increasingly competitive housing market.

- The Centrelink system MUST be overhauled. There are a number of issues that are ensuring the ineffectiveness of the current system.
  1. Students reporting income should not be required to report their before tax income. Reporting the before tax income increases the chance and proportion of their Youth Allowance benefit that is deducted. Money that is taxed on any income is not money available to spend. Therefore it seems completely backward for this money to be included in a student’s reportable income for the purposes of Centrelink.

  2. The level of income at which the Youth Allowance payment is cut must be revised. This ties in directly with the above point (the amount taxed on any income is cutting the amount of Youth Allowance paid). Students are currently being punished for working, in a system where it is virtually impossible to strike a balance between working and accessing the Youth Allowance we have qualified for.

  3. The time constraint associated with qualifying for Youth Allowance independence must be removed. Deferring and working for a year can see you earn enough to qualify as independent. However, Centrelink also requires 18 months to have elapsed since your last Year 12 exam before you can apply for any benefits. This means that the earliest students who deferred are able to access payments is half way through their first year of study. For students who don’t defer the earliest they can access any benefits is a year and a half into their study (assuming they have earned enough to qualify as independent).

  4. Rent Assistance must be considered inline with today’s increasing cost of housing. For it to be considered as a payment that assists with the payment of rent it is crucial that Rent Assistance levels are regularly up-dated to reflect the current housing market.

  5. The amount of paperwork that must be completed for Centrelink is incredible. It is often quite complex and it is very difficult to access any sort of assistance. While a focus on providing correct information is understandable, it would be quite easy
to unintentionally make a mistake on the forms that are currently required by Centrelink. The process needs to be simplified to ensure that everyone who is entitled to assistance is able to access it fairly and without fear of prosecution. The ability to make contact with a regular “case manager” would also help to ensure students can trust the information they receive from Centrelink and know where to turn when help is required.

It is my belief that these are realistic changes that could be implemented quickly with incredibly positive results. Long term plans must also be investigated and implemented. Rural students across Victoria must have consistent access to high quality education. And if it is their chosen path, they must have access to university. In a fair and relevant system, this access would include vital assistance to overcome barriers and hurdles that occur as a result of geographical location.