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

Online Submission

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Mr Axil Lonergan, Year 11 Student, Ouyen Secondary College

Hello my name is Axil Lonergan; I am 16 years old and attend Ouyen Secondary College in the Mallee with a population of approximately 160 students. I live on a farm, 10km away from the school and 100km from the nearest Higher Education Centre in Mildura. To get to school each day I travel by car as my mother is a PE/Biology teacher at my school.

This year I am in Year 11 and currently I’m studying 6 VCE subjects of the 14 subjects that were on offer.

At our school we receive a number of visits from representatives from universities and TAFEs to talk to us about further education and help us decide on what we want to do in the future. At the moment my plans for the future is to get into Information Technology or Engineering fields of work and get there go to University.

To get into University I am studying six VCE subject, five of these subjects are Unit 1 & 2 while one subject is Unit 3 & 4. The benefit of doing a Unit 3 & 4 subject in Year 11 is that allows me to complete the subject without the hassles of Year 12 and hopefully allows me to boost my ENTER and increase the likelihood of getting into my chosen university course. I have not really thought about which university I would like to go to but due to rising travel costs it would be more sensible to go to closer university such as the University of Ballarat or La Trobe University. After completing university I am unsure where I would like to work but it would probably be in the city due to the limited employment opportunities in my chosen fields of work in rural areas.

Although I may have some ideas to what I want to do in the future there are many barriers that need to be overcome to follow through with this. One such barrier is the limited amount of VCE subjects on offer. At our school, of the 100 plus VCE subjects, only 14 of these are offered; this is due to rural schools being unable to attract teachers qualified to teach these others subjects. For example, this year I would have preferred to take Year 12 Information Technology instead of Year 12 Health and Human Development. I have found the course work interesting but it is far removed from the skills I need for my career goals. I would love to do VCE Chemistry at Year 12 but I am not enjoying the Distance Education program that is available to us, due to lack of qualified teachers.
Another problem is the cost of going to university. With the ongoing drought in our area it is difficult to have enough money to pay for the huge costs that come with going to university. Some of these costs include course fees, residence costs, buying a car and the cost of fuel. All these make university very expensive for rural students. The situation is exaggerated given that my parents are already supporting one student at university. Based upon my preliminary research I expect that I will need to do a four year university program. The HECS debt I will incur with be about $10,000 per year.

Accommodation on rural campuses (if I am lucky to get some) is cheaper than the city and this might cost me about $10,000 per year. I need to operate a car and hope my family can give me a start with this, because my part time work earns me $30.00 per week, a far cry from purchasing a reliable vehicle that will get me 800km round trips from university to home when I need to. There are going to be lots of incidental costs like textbooks, photocopying and supplies…plus food! All up, I need upfront money even if I decide to defer my HECS payments, my degree will cost in excess of $80,000.

Finally my last barrier is that there are limited employment opportunities in rural areas for those who complete university courses in the areas of my interest. Most jobs in rural areas require little training or can be done through apprenticeship, this sees lower numbers of rural students go to university as they don’t need to; they can go get a job at their home town with limited training. However, for me with a university degree, I will be unlikely to find work suitable in rural Victoria and will be forced, like the majority of rural young people to never return to rural Victoria.

I have mixed feelings about all of this. I don’t want to go as far away as Melbourne, that is too daunting at this stage. I don’t mind the idea of Ballarat or Bendigo. There will be some good aspects to spending time in larger towns such as fast food, entertainment and fun. But the challenges I expect, at this stage, include being homesick, having trusted family and friends around me when things go wrong, being confident about who to trust and where services and assistance. I plan, like many other kids do, to come back to play local footy on weekends, if I am close enough.

I obtained a Kwong Lee Dow Scholarship last year for the University of Melbourne, I know that there are outstanding courses at Melbourne based universities and I might get support from a scholarship to help the cost, but I will have tough decisions to make if I need to move this far away from home.

All in all I believe that there should be:
• More incentives for teachers to come to rural areas
• Lower university fees and
• More jobs in rural areas for those who complete a university course.