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

Online Submission

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As a parent of two current university students - possibly three in 2009 - I feel able to answer some of the key questions. My role as Program Co-ordinator and teacher at a small regional campus of a large suburban TAFE institute, provides me with extra insight into how and why both parents and young people view their post-secondary education options.

1. Are students from different geographic areas (eg regions, suburbs, or localities) in Victoria

   a) more or less likely to apply for university?

      I think regional students are less likely to apply for university, and will expand on my reasons below.

   b) more or less likely to receive or accept university offers?

      I would like to think they are just as likely to receive an offer if they apply for one, assuming there is integrity and objectivity in the ENTER selection system.

   c) more or less likely to complete a university course once they enrol?

      I feel sure that students coming from regional areas are less likely to complete their university course than those from suburban areas. If the completion rate is less than I expect, I believe the reasons will be quite different, once investigated. Suburban students can course-shop without undue hardship (HECS aside), whereas regional students face the problems I will outline next.

2. Is this because students from different geographic areas…

   a) stay at school for longer, or leave earlier?

      I cannot comment on whether regional students stay at school longer than suburban students - I am sure the formal statistics exit elsewhere. My feeling is that locally they do not. There has been the perception of a 'booming' local economy caused by the establishment of couple of businesses along the lines of BigW/Bunnings/Coles but young people are beginning to find that these only provide a limited number of
unreliable, poorly paid, casual positions. Once they have left school though, and missed a year or so, they are extremely reluctant to return and unfortunately there is no local alternative such as an adult VCE class via TAFE.

b) choose different subjects or courses at school?

From my experience, most VCE students locally do not have a concerted plan or focus by the end of Year 10 as to what their program of study will be through VCE, and many end up with a patchy, general group of subjects which severely limit their choices. Again, it us unfortunate that they cannot study locally in a non-school environment, once the student knows what are they are interested in, to pick up the missing subjects which would strengthen their application.

c) choose different post-school pathways (eg TAFE, apprenticeships, or employment)?

The students drift off in a range of directions - I say 'drift' because only a memorable few have definite plans - to short-term employment, attracted by the idea of having their own money and leaving school; traineeships, which are increasing locally but are only for 12-18 months and usually only to a Cert 3 level; and to TAFE, if they are able to find the courses they want within a limited repertoire that is often directed more towards unemployed adults.

d) have greater or fewer university campuses/courses available in their community?

There are no options to study at university locally. If the student has a car and sufficient petrol money, they can undertake a three hour return trip to the nearest university campus, which has a limited range of courses.

e) are affected by other factors, such as economic, social or cultural issues?

The factors which students and their parents must take into account in my area, and which deter many from considering and/or continuing university study are (in order of importance): economic - the cost of living away from home, social - the distance from the support of family and friends, and difficulties with transport. Cultural issues are not a factor I see regularly in my area as a reason for non-participation.

From my own personal experience, our modest family income (<$80,000) is barely coping with having two students at university. One lives in a hall of residence (uncatered) interstate, the other share-houses interstate. Both are at the universities they believed offered the best course, and as a mother it is unfortunate they could not find something closer to their family base, although both are missing family
and friends and talk of changing their course and trying to transfer to a Victorian uni. Neither is receiving any assistance from Centrelink.

The eldest daughter, aged 23 and classed as independent due to the time she spent previously as an apprentice, has been working two or three full days per week, placing pressure on herself to complete coursework, and has been cut off from Centrelink allowance because her wages are slightly above the allowable limit. She backs up the story I have heard many times that it is extremely difficult to understand and jump through all the bureaucratic hoops to get back onto any study allowance. She feels she has no choice but to keep both working and studying - if she was able to get the Centrelink allowance again, it is so low she would have to work anyway, and she may lose her job if she asks for a reduced number of shifts to satisfy the Centrelink income limits.

The younger daughter, 20, spent last year overseas working as volunteer through Global Activity Projects Australia but her income, most of which she earned before she left, is a mere $400 short of Centrelink’s independence criteria. However, she is not eligible to claim yet – not until she has been out of school for 18 months. This is a ridiculous requirement - students can only defer for one year, not two! This means even if students are eligible for some assistance after deferring and reaching the $18,000 requirement, they must decide whether to spend the first six months of their course dependent entirely on their parents or trying to support themselves; or declining the offer, working longer and (assuming they still want to study, two years down the track) hoping they are accepted once they re-apply for the course!

Even if one satisfies all the criteria, the Centrelink allowance provides minimal assistance. The uncatered university residence is $150 per week - the cheapest hall of residence we could apply for. Rents in share-houses take the majority of the payment, leaving little for bills, transport, food, books, clothing, etc. Students have no choice but to try to work as well as study, and/or depend on regular financial assistance from their parents. I struggle to support my two students as it is and I cannot understand how any parent on a lower wage would be able to do it. Indeed, I come across many parents in my work for whom university is simply not an option they can offer their children.

On the economic scale, I see my children as in the bottom bracket, beyond which very few representative children would be found in university - not because they are incapable of achieving success but because their geographic location demands such extra expense as to make the option unavailable. This is what needs to be addressed. If the student has to leave home to study, there must be more financial assistance to them. Otherwise, the regional students from non-wealthy families will continue to be underrepresented at universities, and of those who make it, many will not be able to perform to their full ability while they are forced to combine study and work simply to house and
feed themselves. Adding to their financial worries, there is the stress of being separated from their usual support network of family and friends, which can escalate expense (phone calls, transport) and detract further from effective study. All in all, it's amazing that as many of them get through as they do, and they should be congratulated.

I have only spoken of the difficulties for regional students in getting to university and being able to complete their course - from firsthand experience, there is also stress on parents while supporting a student, both financial and emotional. I know I carry financial stress into the workplace, although I try not to. I also carry the stress of trying to emotionally support my distant students, which again affects my workplace.

3. What effect does going to university (or not) have on…

a) students from different geographic areas in Victoria?

Wherever there is a wider cross-section of the community represented, the participants benefit from being in contact with people from different backgrounds, and exposure to different ideas, attitudes and beliefs. A university environment which excludes certain economic and geographic groups disadvantages both the excluded group as well as those lucky enough to be included but who will only experience one sector of the population.

b) their families and communities?

Having well-educated, visionary, well-travelled people in the local population lifts the whole community. They bring hope. They are an inspiration to others and their achievements encourage people to look beyond their own borders, consider what their own potential might be and what they could achieve themselves. Such positivism can only benefit the local community.

c) skills shortages and the Victorian economy?

There are capable, willing people who are not being trained because the opportunity for them to do so is not there. This is because the opportunity cannot be provided locally or else the expense of relocating to the where the opportunity exists is such that an attempt cannot be made or cannot be sustained. Even if the attempt is sustained, the result is often below optimum because of the distractions which have to be dealt with along way. An educated population should be an aim of any and all governments, and would help the economy across all sectors – health, community services, multiculturalism, law and policing, environmental protection, political awareness, international relations and so on.