Monash University submission
to the Parliament of Victoria – Education & Training Committee Inquiry
into geographical differences in the rate in which Victorian students
participate in higher education

Background

Monash University is Australia’s largest university with nearly 55,000 students and more than 6000 staff. It has six Victorian campuses serving diverse geographical locations: three metropolitan, two outer urban and one regional. Monash is a research intensive university and offers a broad range of disciplines, some drawing on traditional academic values taught within an overarching theoretical framework and others that follow a practical approach designed for applied (real world) solutions. This broad discipline range is covered by teaching and research in ten faculties that are organised into Art & Design, Arts, Business & Economics, Education, Engineering, Information Technology, Law, Medicine, Nursing and Health Science, Pharmacy and Science. Within these faculties, a wide spectrum of programs is offered spanning the standard bachelor, graduate and higher degree by research courses through to associate degrees, dual award programs with TAFE colleges and other pathway programs.

In its key strategic documents Monash has a university-wide objective that the university seeks to select the most able students regardless of means and circumstances. Monash University seeks, as an institution, to moderate the factors impeding access to and participation in higher education.

Due to its size, scale and reach within Victoria and its overall mission, Monash is well-placed to comment and welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to this inquiry.

Geographical differences in participation rates may be based on a number of factors: educational disadvantage, socio-cultural, financial or geography itself. There is a vast body of existing data and research available which has already explored the reasons for and impact upon participation rates across Victorian geographical regions. Main data sources and some relevant research studies, many of which were undertaken by Monash researchers, are listed in the appendix.

The focus of this submission therefore is upon the strategies that Monash has developed to mitigate factors contributing to disadvantage. To this end, Monash has a suite of programs and initiatives ranging from support programs at secondary schools with low levels of participation in tertiary education, to special admissions schemes, aptitude tests and specialised pathway programs, to the provision of equity and merit scholarships from the university’s own funds. There are also a number of programs and benefits available to students once enrolled ranging from learning support services and transition programs to financial loans and subsidised childcare.

It is hoped that through this submission some of these strategies can be explored by other institutions and that the State Government might give consideration to providing financial and other support to programs where appropriate.
Mitigating socio-cultural factors by developing aspirations

Schools Access Monash program
The Schools Access Monash program (SAM) has been designed to encourage an awareness of tertiary education within schools with low transition rates to higher education and is focussed around the university’s outer urban and regional campuses. The SAM program provides a range of activities for a select number of schools to increase students’ awareness of universities and courses available and to help students raise their academic aspirations. The program aims to:

- encourage tertiary participation;
- provide information about Monash programs and university life;
- engage with school students, parents and staff about educational possibilities;
- provide individual assistance by Monash students. Monash University students are enlisted to individually assist Year 12 students to maximise their VCE results and therefore enhance their prospects of studying at university; and
- provide financial support (scholarships) for selected students. Monash provides a scholarship for one student from each school participating in the program, who is eligible to attend Monash University.

Information sessions are delivered by academic staff and focus on engaging with students, parents and teachers, offering free VCE revision lectures and motivational presentations and providing professional development for teachers. The program is being expanded to include more schools.

Education Forums
Monash Berwick and Peninsula campuses have educational forums (South East Education forum and Peninsula Education precinct) which have been developed to foster greater collaboration between Monash and nearby schools, TAFEs and Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLEN). The Gippsland campus is represented on the Baw Baw/Latrobe LLEN and has strong connections to the other two LLENs in the area – South Gippsland/Bass Coast and East Gippsland/Wellington.

In addition, Monash Gippsland Campus is embarking on two key initiatives aimed at increasing the aspirations of young people to study at university. The first is the Monash Discovery Club – an initiative supported by the Regional Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) with the involvement of principals from local primary schools. The program enables the campus to engage with students in years 5 and 6 and provides the opportunity for primary students to discover university. The second initiative is a joint project involving the campus and Kurnai College at the Gippsland Education Precinct and aims to increase the interest/number of year 10-12 students specialising in maths and science through their participation in a range of university activities.

Gippsland Educational Precinct
East Victoria in particular has one of the lowest rates of progression to higher education. To foster greater progression Monash Gippsland campus is now home to the Gippsland Education Precinct (GEP) which has received much support from the Victorian Government. The precinct brings together Monash University, Central Gippsland Institute of TAFE, Kurnai Secondary College and Gippsland Group Training as precinct partners. The single facility at Churchill is designed to minimise barriers students face when transferring between different levels of
educational institution and maximises opportunities for students to customise their education in ways that will best meet their needs and interests. The precinct has three broad goals:

- to address the low educational and employment outcome of young people in the Gippsland region, with particular emphasis on the Latrobe Valley;
- to tackle high levels of youth disengagement and low level of transition from school to tertiary education, training and employment; and
- to redress the drift of secondary students to institutions outside the local area.

Mitigating educational disadvantage

Aptitude testing
Monash has implemented aptitude tests to identify applicants whose ENTER scores may not fully reflect their ability to succeed at university. This was informed by similar initiatives in the United Kingdom. UniTest, the aptitude test developed by the Australian Council for Education Research (ACER), was piloted in 2007. Monash absorbed the costs associated with prospective students participating in the UniTest pilot program. To increase the range of prospective students who could display their talents in such a manner without passing on the costs to students required the consideration of other options.

Monash, in collaboration with the Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre (VTAC), undertook research and analysis which supported a request to the Victorian Course and Curriculum Authority (VCCA) for permission to use the General Achievement Test (GAT) as an additional selection criterion. The GAT is taken by all students undertaking a Unit 3/4 subject in the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE). In 2008, the GAT was trialled as a supplementary criterion. It is expected that use of the GAT for course selection purposes will be broadened to other universities in 2009.

Special Entry Access Scheme
The Special Entry Access Scheme (SEAS) is available for applicants who have been unable to reach their full educational potential or who may have had their choices limited because they have been disadvantaged by their life circumstances. Under SEAS additional consideration is given to applicants on the basis of evidence that they belong to equity categories and/or categories of disadvantage. Monash applies bonus points to the ENTER results of applicants who are in the middle-band and/or have applied for consideration under SEAS.

Access pathways
Monash offers a number of alternative pathways to students who were not initially successful in gaining a place at university. The main access pathways are:

- two-year associate degrees offered at the Gippsland campus in the fields of accounting, applied science and social welfare. The entry standard for associate degrees is lower than that for the equivalent bachelor level program. Students who complete the associate degree successfully are eligible for entry to the degree program with full credit.
- the Diploma of Tertiary Studies (DoTS) has been offered at the Gippsland campus for many years and was offered for the first time at the Berwick campus and from the Leongatha Hospital (Nursing only) in 2008. It provides an alternative entry pathway to degree programs offered at Gippsland, Berwick and Peninsula campuses in business, education, nursing, information technology, science and general humanities. The entry standard is not as high as that required for degree programs at these campuses. Students
enrolling in DoTS are provided with extra learning support. Those students who successfully complete the DoTS are given full credit allowing entry to second year of a degree program.

- pathway programs from courses taken at local TAFEs to Monash degrees are available through the Gippsland, Berwick and Peninsula campuses. These programs provide TAFE graduates with the opportunity of gaining entry into courses in business, early childhood education and nursing.

**Mitigating financial disadvantage through scholarship and bursary programs**

The issue that recurs as a factor affecting low progression to university is cost. In some regions, this is also impacting upon the decision to take a gap year. As an example, research shows that East Victoria has one of the highest rates of students deferring commencement of their studies and in the South Gippsland area, it is reported that up to 30% of students completing year 12 opt for a gap year.

Access for students from low socio-economic status (LSES) and Indigenous backgrounds are among the University’s key performance indicators. Monash has made use of the Federal Government policy changes in 2005, to charge the 25% premium on Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) fees. The proceeds of this premium have been used to fund equity scholarships worth more than $4.6 million annually to Monash. Monash equity-based scholarships and bursaries recognise that people have different needs and some groups experience disadvantage that impacts on their educational progress. Scholarships are awarded to students who have both excellent academic backgrounds and come from one or more of the defined equity or personal disadvantage groups including people from rural and isolated areas and people experiencing low socio-economic circumstances.

Monash also administers Commonwealth Scholarships which are awarded to eligible students on a competitive basis and provide financial support for costs associated with higher education or for accommodation. Eligible students include those from low socio-economic backgrounds, particularly rural and regional areas and Indigenous students. These scholarships are aimed at students doing undergraduate degrees, associate degrees and approved enabling courses.

**Mitigating the influences of geography**

The “On Track” survey has identified transportation as a key issue in the on-going participation and retention of students in tertiary education. This is one area where Monash University has had little opportunity to mitigate the influence. Public transport to some of our campuses is poor, with little or no rail service, multiple modes of transport required to get to and from a campus and infrequent bus services. Any improvements in public transport infrastructure would be well received.

**Further support programs available upon enrolment**

Once a student enrolls, Monash offers special support services that have been designed to help new regional or students from disadvantaged areas of Melbourne. These include customised orientation and transition programs, child care and counselling services. Individual faculties
also have initiatives that assign mentors, pastoral care and personal support for rural and disadvantaged students.

Monash Libraries offer special “Learning Skills Classes” and drop-in sessions that cater for disadvantaged students wishing to improve their academic performance and approach to study.

There is also a loan scheme for students who are experiencing short-term financial hardship.

**In summary**

Monash brings together the aspects of its initiatives to mitigate disadvantage under the banner of the Access Monash program. This covers alternative entry pathways, special admissions schemes, scholarships, bursaries, grants and loans schemes. The individual components of the Access Monash program have been reviewed to measure their effectiveness in supporting Monash key objectives of: fairness and social justice in education; and inclusion and social justice through education.

There are opportunities for the State Government to help increase the rates of access and retention of students in higher education. For example, support for initiatives like the Schools Access Monash (SAM) program would allow expansion to a larger number of schools and help lift the aspirations of many teenagers. Improving public transport infrastructure and ensuring campuses were well served would also aid in the retention of students.
Appendix

Key data sources


Relevant research studies


Edwards, D., Birrell, B. & Smith T. F., (2005) *Unequal Access to University Places: Revisiting Entry to Tertiary Education in Victoria*, Melbourne: Centre for Population and Urban Research, Monash University. The findings show that there has been a growing divergence in access to university places between those young people who attend Independent schools, many Catholic schools and some inner city Government secondary schools, and young people who attend Government secondary schools elsewhere in Victoria on the other.
