A response from the North Central Local Learning and Employment Network to the Parliament of Victoria Education and Training Committee to the:

Inquiry into Geographical Differences in Which Victorian Students Participate in Higher Education.
**Summarised Response:**

In brief it is the belief of the North Central LLEN that a large body of evidence exists to support the argument that a range of issues and challenges exist for rural young people who aspire to further education and training that impacts their capacity to participate. Research shows that the challenges that exist for rural young people are in addition to challenges that all young people, including those from metropolitan and larger regional centres also commonly encounter in seeking to participate in higher education.

It is a challenge to provide quantifiable data to support what may be the underling impact of the issues faced by rural young people in relation to their access to university and higher education options. It is a commonly held belief that the ‘acceptance’ by families and communities of the challenges and barriers to higher educational opportunities has and may continue to lead to a lack of aspiration by some young people to obtain further education and training; thus creating a further impediment to issues of equitable access and opportunities as well as future skills development and economic sustainability in rural Victoria.

The core focus of the submission is to introduce to the Committee some people who may enable you to see the ‘face’ of the research findings which many others have provided.

The North Central LLEN is providing a range of case studies. We are in particular seeking to support the recent submission to the ‘Inquiry’ by YACVic. The North Central LLEN also strongly encourages the Committee to capitalise on the recent comprehensive work and findings of the Parliament of Victoria in the ‘Inquiry into Retaining Young People in Rural Towns and Community’s 2006’.

The information provided links to the Terms of Reference and supported by the case study of young person or their families who are or have resided for a significant portion of their lives in the rural areas of the North Central Region.

All case studies have been used with the express permission of those involved and a willingness to further participate in public hearings if the opportunity arises.
a) ‘Variations in the number and type of university applications offers, acceptances and completions in different metropolitan, rural and regional areas’

d) ‘Potential Geographical, economical social, cultural and other influences on university applications, offers, acceptances and completions across Victorian communities:

Case Study 1

Cailha Skinner – Cailha completed VCE in 2006. We find that Cailha case represents a large number of young people who have been required through family circumstance to live independently yet are continuously disadvantaged due to the cost and the current Centrelink criteria to assist them to fulfill their dreams of a university education.

- Cailha is the eldest child in a family of three children with a large gap (second marriage) between her and her siblings.
- Cailha’s parents are middle income earners with a combined income of less than $80,000.00. This has precluded Cailha from access to additional support.
- Deferred from university and immediately moved to Bendigo and commence a retail traineeship earning $12.00 per hour. She remained in employment until she moved to Geelong in anticipation of taking up her university offer.
- In Geelong she secured part time employment in anticipation of commencing university at the beginning of 2008.
- Was distressed to find out on her approach to Centrelink (all done as an independent self funded working 19 year old) that she had yet to meet the criteria of the 18 month time line.
- Cailha had to immediately seek fulltime employment, in the form of a retail position to, remain supporting herself.
- The gap of 3 months with no income support was seen as impossible for Cailah and she forfeited her place a Deakin Geelong.

In speaking with Cailah it became clear that the 18 month criteria in accessing Centrelink Youth allowance may be the ‘final straw’ in undermining her aspirations of a university education at this time of her life. As with many young people we have spoken with there is a commonly held misperception that the ‘allowance’ will become available at anytime if financial independence is earned within an 18 month period. This time span requires that she not enroll until a mid year intake and the challenges associated with this were to great. Cailah also feels that the longer she is in the ‘groove’ of employment the more challenging it will become to change that pattern and lifestyle and re-engage in training. It is likely that with the challenges faced to date, the current level of discouragement and the possible challenges yet to come, that Cailah will not commence let alone complete her university ambitions.
Cailah's Cost of Living for 12 Months

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Monthly income (take home) per hour $12.00</th>
<th>$1992.00 (This amount is based on a 45 hour week as Cailah regularly worked between 45 and 48 hours)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parental contribution at the commencement of 2007</td>
<td>$1000.00 (towards car)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monthly Expenditure</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Rent in share accommodation</td>
<td>$400.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Car- running and maintenance</td>
<td>$240.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Household goods &amp; services</td>
<td>$90.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Food</td>
<td>$360.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Entertainment &amp; Leisure</td>
<td>$160.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Clothing **</td>
<td>$300.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Monthly Income</td>
<td>$1992.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total expenditure</td>
<td>$1550.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difference ***</td>
<td>$442.00 per month</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** Cailha has highlighted a frustration that while working in an ‘up market’ retail environment, there was a requirement that employees wear products from the floor. These came at a substantial cost (even after an employee discount) and were not a tax deduction because did not fit the requirements of ‘a labelled uniform’. This was a significant burden on Cailah and impacted on the amount of money she was able to save that may have assisted her to go without income support and commence university in first semester of 2008.

Still not ‘independent’? Still not entitled to attend university?

*** this amount was for unfixed expenses and included car repairs, replacing appliances and health costs.
Case Study Two

The Smith family has 3 young people currently aged between 18 and 24 years. The eldest daughter Sally completed Secondary College and enrolled in university to commence a Bachelor of Teaching at Deakin University. Sally’s experience was one that many other young people from rural backgrounds encounter:

- Sally’s family income would be termed as ‘middle class’ (combined family income of more that $50,000 and less than $100,000) deeming her ineligible for any support including Youth Allowance and living away from home supplement.
- Sally lived 3 ½ hours from the University campus and was required to relocate, leaving a secure family and community environment.
- The cost of residential campus living was considered out of reach for the family and accommodation was sought with relatives.
- The rural community in which Sally lives does not have regular public transport linking to the nearest regional centre and therefore limits access to the metropolitan Centre. This required the family to provide a vehicle to support her ability to attend university and come home.
- Sally’s first year university experience lasted two weeks and she withdrew to return to her local home town and weigh up her options and opportunities.
- Sally was entitled to no financial support to commence job seeking.

In discussing with Sally the reasons for her withdrawal from university it becomes clear that if Sally had lived in a large regional centre or metropolitan area she would have “rolled out of bed, jumped on a train and attended university while enjoying a sense of security and no big financial worries to contend with”. Living off campus increased the challenge in forming new friendship groups in a new environment with limited support and created a level of stress that was not able to be sustained by Sally.

While the next two years held a range of challenges for Sally, including dealing with a level of personal disappointment and the feelings of failure, there was also the issue of securing employment which is not readily available in most rural communities. Ultimately Sally realised that she would again have to leave the rural community to obtain employment and went on to endure a very challenging time for a further 12 month period. Sally ultimately found secure employment towards the end of her first year out of school and maintained fulltime employment until returning to university two years after completing year 12. While not all of Sally’s experiences were negative and she now has a wealth of knowledge to assist her in her final year of Bachelor of Social Work and Community Services I am sure that she will confirm it is a time of life that she would rather have not faced as an 18 year old.

As Sally prepared to commenced university at the beginning of 2005, her brother Bob was just completing year 12 had applied and was successful at obtaining a place for a degree in Agriculture Science a Melbourne University. Bob chose to defer his placement (with some level of encouragement from his parents) to work on local farms and in labouring positions “wherever he can find them”. Bob’s plans changed when he received a full
(HECS free) scholarship to Melbourne University which included $2000.00 cash per year. There was still a serious amount of anxiety in the family as to how the full room and board, vehicle and living expenses would be supported leading to some creative solutions instigated by Bob:

- Bob actively sought all possible scholarship opportunities and was successful in obtaining three individual scholarships which resulted in a total of $13000.00 cash payment each year.
- Bob, through scholarships supported his room and board (shared accommodation) and the bulk of his living expenses throughout the 3 year university course and required only moderate assistance from his parents.
- Bob also further supported himself through some local cash-in-hand maintenance work in Melbourne and by contract harvesting for the summer months back in his rural home town.

With the financial support he obtained Bob feels that his experience was not the same as his sister Sally’s as there was less stress with which to contend. Bob was also part a smaller university faculty and living in shared accommodation provided an early opportunity to quickly establish friendships.

Bob often commented on the stress his housemates were under as rural students in a similar situation to him with the exception that they had not obtained scholarships and regularly worked between 20 and 30 hours each week to support themselves while attending a full time university course.

2007 saw the last Smith child complete VCE. Mary has had the opportunity to see the past several years unfold around her, she has seen the stress of her older sister and parents regarding the commitment and cost of living away from home. Mary has also had the longest exposure to the pressures and loss of income to her family during the last 7 year period of drought on the farm and knows that the family income and capacity has been severely reduced. Based on the above knowledge and experiences Mary has deferred and was encouraged to do so by her parents.

- Mary obtained part time work immediately upon completion of VCE in her local town and commenced job seeking in the closet regional centre
- Mary is not eligible for any Centrelink assistance while job seeking
- She obtained work in a pharmacy and made a rental commitment in a shared house in Bendigo where she will live independently and cover all of her own costs for the year of 2008.
- Became ill two weeks after commencing work and was off work for an 8 week period – during this period of time in which all financial obligations of rent etc needed to be met these cost had to be supported by the family as no support was available due to the family income and asset test and ineligibility for youth Allowance.

The challenge in Mary’s case is that she is very keen to commence university in 2009. Based on her current income at the Traineeship Rate of $8.50 per hour she will not obtain...
the benchmark earnings to be declared independent by Centrelink and will also be very frustrated to realise that she will have only been out of school 16 months not the 18 months required when the University year commences in 2009.

We believe that there are many families that face similar or far greater challenges in seeking to provide their children with the opportunity to attend university at the completion of secondary college.

Note: the names in this family have been changed for confidentiality in relation to the broad distribution of this report; however members of this family would is happy to appear at rural hearings.

Case Study 3

The Verley Family- what does the future hold for a farming/shearing family of what appears to be 6 high performing (a description provided by local teaching staff) and ‘aspirational’ young people.

Jackie and Shane the parents of this family have indicated that the years ahead will provide the family with serious challenges and that they are already ensuring her children know that university may not be an option until ‘financial independence’ is achieved by Centrelink standards.

The nearest University campus is 120 kilometres from their home which would require accommodation and transport to be funded by the family in addition to general course fees and payments. In addition this regional campus is limited in it’s offerings and would not offer all areas of training and qualifications (e.g: engineering) which these students may choose to pursue.

One would question the equity of this family’s opportunity in comparing their family with a family of similar income, if they resided in a regional centre or metropolitan area. Living near public transport and access to a university campus would enable these young people to participate in higher education with little additional costs to this family, however living in rural Victoria this family faces substantial financial barriers in accessing skilled training or further university education for their children. We believe that situations such as this have the real potential to affect the aspirations and the opportunities of young people in determining their areas of interest and future goals.
Conclusion:
The NCLLEN again encourages the Government to support the previous findings and recommendations made by the ‘Inquiry into Retaining Young People in Rural Towns and Community’s 2006’.

In particular the NCLLEN supports the key recommendations made in the YACVic Submission as follows:

1. YACVic recommends that the inquiry consider the recommendations previously made by the Rural and Regional Services and Development Committee inquiry into Retaining Young People in Rural Towns and Communities relating to education. Of particular relevance to the issues raised in this submission is Recommendation 34: ‘That the State Government urges the Commonwealth to introduce a variant of Youth Allowance payment which provides the necessary funding to overcome the high cost of university study for rural young people.’

2. That the Inquiry considers the range of alternative support options (such as investment in mentoring opportunities or improved support for students to prepare for higher education) to better assist those young people who move to urban areas for the purposes of study.

3. That the Inquiry make recommendations to strengthen the capacity of employers of rural young people to assist and encourage those young people to access higher education training.

4. That the Inquiry make recommendations to improve young people’s access to transport in rural and regional areas in order to engage in post-secondary education opportunities. YACVic endorses the recommendations made in the submission by VCOSS to this Inquiry, including the need to improve tertiary students access to ‘school bus’ services.