PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY INTO GEOGRAPHICAL DIFFERENCE IN THE RATE IN WHICH VICTORIAN COUNTRY STUDENTS PARTICIPATE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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MAY 20 2008
RESPONSE TO KEY RESEARCH QUESTIONS

a) Variations in the number and type of university applications, offers, acceptances and completions in different metropolitan, rural and regional areas.

Students from remote areas such as Orbost, competing for the most highly competitive areas of tertiary entry - for example Medicine - are disadvantaged for several reasons. These include:

- Difficulty in matching ENTERs that are strongly influenced by students from more socio-economically affluent areas or wealthy private schools, with all the additional assistance that this privilege brings them.

- Students consequently have the options of a less favoured course preference, and/or taking their chances on gaining their preferred preference, by achieving a level of tertiary results that will allow them to transfer between courses. In competitive areas this may or may not be achieved and credit may or may not be allowed.

- Where transfer is approved it may still result in no credit awarded with the result that a course may take considerably longer to complete, which in itself can be a deterrent.

- Lack of diversity of professional role models and stimuli that encourage that would encourage consideration of wider career options.

b) Influences of school retention rates, including enrolments and completions for VCE, VCAL & VET in schools on participation in higher education.

Orbost Secondary College has a vigorous VET program, with over 100 students enrolled across 10 traditional programs. Many students have completed the majority of their VET studies by the end of Year 11. These programs have some effect on participation in higher education via:

- VET and VCAL contributing to increased retention rates from Years 10 – 12, which is obviously a college objective.

- Retention rates which are also partly due to the lack of local employment opportunities, in particular trades where there are restricted or non-existent apprenticeship opportunities which many of our students aspire to.

- Males tend to pursue trade related career paths.

- Although a number of these students who are retained will undertake VCAL with a mixture of VCE, VET and VCAL units, there is a dilution of the ethos of academic excellence and lack of peer stimulus and competition in a school cohort that can reduce individual Study Scores and thus ENTERS.
c) Influences of participation in other post school Pathways, including TAFE enrolments and take up of apprenticeships or other employment opportunities, on participation in higher education.

- Girls at Orbost Secondary College greatly outnumber boys eg (three to one in 2007) in applying for, gaining and accepting offers of higher education. Student cohorts in some years have had a greater number who have chosen TAFE post Year 12.

- Boys have tended to choose apprenticeships even when they have the ability, if not the interest, in applying for higher education. At our school girls historically achieve higher ENTERs than boys.

d) Potential geographic, economic, social, cultural and other influences on university applications, offers, acceptances and completions across Victorian communities.

Geographic
Orbost Secondary College, located 380km east of Melbourne has been recognised by a variety of criteria as being a part of a rurally isolated and significantly socially and economically disadvantaged community. It has been a participant in several State and Federal Government initiatives that have sought in some way to redress this. These have included:

- Disadvantaged Schools Programs, Country Education Project and Commonwealth Scholarship programs linked to Postcodes and administered by Victorian universities. In 2008, 50% of families with students at Orbost Secondary College receive EMA or Youth Allowance, which graphically illustrates this disadvantage.

- Universities also recognise this to a varying degree via Special Entry Schemes.

Orbost Secondary College has an established, but hard won, culture of students being prepared to move away from home to undertake higher education; however participation rates are still below the national average. Significant numbers of students and their families are not able to exercise this option simply because of the following:

- The Schools Equity & Access Scheme, (SEAS) administered via VTAC, has been introduced to streamline Special Entry and Scholarship schemes, but has in some cases increased the complexity of applications, an example being that not all tertiary institutions use SEAS as a vehicle for Commonwealth Scholarships. Gaining a Commonwealth Accommodation Scholarship, for example, can be the determining factor in whether a student accepts a tertiary offer or not. These scholarships are sometimes not awarded until after the academic year has begun and are not deferrable. Many other university scholarships are simply ENTER based which still results in disadvantage for reasons outlined in Key Research Question A.
• Where a student or their family does not meet means testing criteria for some Commonwealth Scholarships or Commonwealth payments, this does not automatically mean that the child can afford to move away from home to study. Conversely, some families are able to structure affairs of lucrative businesses to take advantage of the thresholds that apply.

• The difficulties, accentuated by geographical remoteness, of *attending study lectures, cultural and enrichment activities that stimulate and motivate must reduce student ENTERs; the higher the required ENTER the more exponential the difficulty of achieving that point or two which spells difference between gaining a first preference and a lower preference.

*Victorian Tertiary Institutions, via VTAC, will not recognise this as a barrier when administering Special Entry Schemes

Economic

*The cost of living away from home to undertake tertiary study is without doubt the single greatest impediment to participation in our experience and for many families an overwhelming burden that can inflict great financial hardship.

Factors that will influence accommodation options:

• Statistics would show that students who are able to live on-campus, at least for the first year of their course, are far more likely to continue their education. However, this is often seen as a too-expensive option.

• Where students wish to live on campus, the up-front accommodation costs per semester can also be a financial deterrent. For families with more than one child studying away from home, costs of on-campus accommodation can make it an unviable option.

• From our experience, students who move to Melbourne and rent or live in share housing in their first year are more likely to defer or drop out than those in on-campus accommodation. Many students have no friend or family networks in Melbourne that can provide even temporary accommodation. We have anecdotal evidence of students being reduced to accepting backpacker accommodation whilst looking for something more permanent and affordable.

• Recent years have seen increasing rates of deferment by our students, often in an attempt to gain independent status so as to become eligible for Centrelink payments.

A careers teacher will always advise a student to apply for accommodation of their choice/s at each institution at the time they lodge course preferences, not at the time offers are made. We have witnessed rural students who have applied early and continually followed up, only to be advised at course offer time that the accommodation is full. Many of students accepted are non-rural students. This has left no other suitable or affordable on-campus options available, as the cost can vary hugely depending on the level of accommodation offered.
Eligibility for Centrelink payments for students living away from home

**Gaining independent status by being unable to live at home due to difficult family circumstances.**
The percentage of students whose family circumstances prevent them living at home, who qualify for independent rate via this route, and who intend to or who are undertaking higher education is relatively small in our experience, but still a significant concern. In some cases the commensurate lack of family support is the final deterrent when the financial costs of living in Melbourne are considered.

**Gaining independent status by earning 75% of the national training wage over 18 months.**
This becomes increasingly difficult to achieve the further into East Gippsland a student lives. This is due in part to:

- Lack of employment opportunities in any form.
- Casual, in particular, or part-time work being the norm with insufficient hours available
- Difficulty in managing more than casual job due to conflicting employer demands
- Low rates of pay eg $10.00 per hour.
- Some employers only offering cash, or combination of taxed wages and cash.
- Very few employers offering eg national award pay rates – the hospitality industry is a prime example.
- Girls in particular see reduced options to earn higher wages in short term work where manual labour, requiring physical strength or acceptance of difficult working conditions can be more financially rewarding in the country.
- Most students are only interested in working for a 12 month period otherwise deferment becomes a two year issue, which most students will find entirely unsatisfactory, increasing the difficulty of meeting the 75% objective.
- Lack of awareness, or rejection on principle of, “creative” schemes such as “round robin” payments that are used by more sophisticated financial managers to pay their own children to reach independent status.
- Students who move away to larger centres to work are more likely to earn the required 75%. However the cost of renting for a student moving to Melbourne, for example, can itself dissuade them from this strategy.
Eligibility for away rate as dependent student
Many students are precluded due to:

- Not qualifying via parental taxable income, which at present cuts out in the $60-70k range – calculated on numbers of dependents, those living away from home to study etc - for Youth Allowance. Again, parental income in the Orbost area tends to be lower than in larger centres, and this is born out by ABS statistics.

- Many families will fall just outside the cut offs, and do not have access to the strategies that reduce taxable income for example salary sacrifice, that allow them to qualify. Again, many local parents are unaware of the means of exploiting options or are simply passive due to a lack of financial acumen. Assuming, of course, that they can afford to reduce their taxable income in the first place which is often not possible where there are commitments such as house payments.

Social Factors include:

- Homes where usually one or both parents has not only no tertiary qualifications, but has often not completed any post-compulsory education, are a contributor to students aspiration and ENTER.

- Education in itself, sooner than being simply a means to an end, can often be seen as something to be completed as quickly as possible and is often not highly valued.

- The lack of diversity of professional role models in the community, instead of providing stimulus and aspiration, contributes to perpetuating this cycle.

e) Advantages and disadvantages of participation and non-participation in higher education for school leavers and their families and communities in different metropolitan, rural and regional areas.

Disadvantages of Participation
Students who live in urban areas and who wish to study at university can often do so without leaving the family home. Should they choose to live on campus simply for lifestyle and/or the advantage this brings, they are often still close to their homes for easy contact with family.

- Country students such as those from Orbost Secondary College are faced with the distance – 380 kilometres, up to a 5 hour one way trip, associated travel costs and reduced public transport options when they wish to return to their families.

- With the gap between city and remote rural house prices the option of selling and relocating whilst their children undertake higher education is not feasible.
Advantages of Participation

Students with the ability to successfully undertake higher education may be influenced to do so via a number of factors:

- Wages for trade and non-trades employees are award based at best and often below award in this community. However, at present, self employed building tradespeople in this locality are enjoying relatively high incomes, although history indicates this to be cyclical.

- For a school leaver with the ability to complete higher education, there are opportunities to return to this community on completion in the health and education fields, with obvious salary benefits for commencing graduates compared to the employee group mentioned above. However, there are restricted opportunities in most other professions.

- Where these school leavers return as graduates, they so often contribute by assuming positions of responsibility in community organisations, spend their higher disposable income in the community and their children contribute to the academic tone of the schools.

f) Potential effects of geographical differences in participation in higher education on skills shortages on the Victorian economy.

Local factors include:

- Exposure to professional role models beyond health and education, (the two biggest employers in the Orbost township) and to a smaller extent resource management, is limited.

- There is limited industry beyond agriculture and forestry that employs professionals in the areas of skill shortage and a commensurate lack of exposure to activities or role models.

- The amalgamation of shires and privatisation of public utilities has further diminished local diversity of the fields that are experiencing professional skills shortages in other more highly populated locations.

g) Strategies to address any barriers contributing to geographic differences in participation in higher education.

- Reassessment of taxable income scales to increase access to living away financial assistance such as Youth Allowance, in particular for Pay As You Earn wage earners, who do not have the ability to structure financial affairs to minimise taxable income as some business owners are able to. Thus, reduce the numbers of students who need to work up to the equivalent of full-time work whilst studying and reduce the financial burden on families who do not qualify for any form of assistance at present.
• Greater recognition by tertiary institutions via their access and equity schemes of the effect of distance, cost and time to attend study lectures and enrichment activities. This is typified by students from Orbost Secondary College who face a 760 kilometre, 10 hour travelling time round trip to Melbourne -which, in turn, has an affect on student ENTER and access to courses.

• Increased use of access schemes such as the RMIT Schools Network Access Scheme which chooses students by way of written application and school supported predictors of success at tertiary level independent of ENTER. This scheme has been an unqualified success in terms of uptake and completion. Similarly, Monash University Gippsland’s Diploma of Tertiary Studies has been an outstanding success for our students.

• Build on regional access such as provided by RMIT at Bairnsdale with their Bachelor of Commerce.

• As a school we gratefully acknowledge that the Commonwealth Scholarship system of recent years has resulted in improved outcomes for a number of our students, and would welcome a further extension of this program, with more pre-course offer scholarship awards that encourage students to begin courses instead of deferring.

• Free public transport vouchers, for country students to enable them to return to their families more often. Concession train and bus to Orbost is around $50 and a car trip around $80 for fuel, to say nothing of the inherent dangers of young drivers and long trips.

• More on-the-job training via co-operative university programs which enable students to undertake some of their studies in their home town, strengthening both the ties of community and family and reducing costs.

• A pro rata system of applying post codes to the 75% of the National Training Wage requirement for independent Youth Allowance, reducing the amount of money that needs to be earned, either on a socio-economic basis or distance from Melbourne. Reasons for this are outlined in Response to Key Research Question D.

• More affordable, supported and supervised accommodation for rural students. Country students applying for on-campus accommodation should have some level of priority over metropolitan students whose families have chosen this option as a lifestyle choice. For rural students, loneliness caused by unsuitable accommodation is a major cause of “dropping out.” There is also a perception that full-fee paying foreign students are advantaged over rural CSP students when applying for accommodation. With skyrocketing city rents, addressing this most basic problem, affordable and suitable accommodation, becomes more urgent.