To the Education and Training Committee.
Inquiry into Geographical Differences in the Rate in which Victorian Students Participate in Higher Education.

I wish to put forward some views on the geographical differences in the rate in which Victorian students participate in higher education.

**Barriers that may prevent or discourage participation in higher education:**

Most students who live in country areas of Victoria have to consider many factors before applying for higher education. First factor is financial. Students who have parents who can afford to place them in Melbourne will chose Melbourne universities but those whose parents are not as financial will chose a university closer to home. Even then this may mean they still have to relocate. There is considerable cost involved for parents either way. Costs of accommodation either within a college which comes in at around $15,000 per year for accommodation and food costs or about the same cost should a student chose to live in a shared house or flat. Then there are the costs of clothing, transport and books and entertainment. Many parents are unable to financially afford it all so students must work part time.

Many students are working 5 nights per week and then attending university during the day. Some of these students may have more then an hours travel to work or university on public transport as it is often cheaper to live in areas that are not so close to the city. This creates added burden, issues around safety whilst using public transport and costs. This then adds to the stress and pressure of living away from home and often results in the student giving up and leaving university or not even considering attending. Many of these students develop depression or anxiety related illness’s and this then adds other burden’s financially about medication and treatment.

Many students have to go for a TAFE course due to financial burden even when this may not be their first choice, or they go out to work during their gap year and hope to earn enough money to study part time to get their degree.

Country students are at a disadvantage to their city counterparts as they must travel or move to seek higher education and sometimes this move may mean being anything up to 300-400 kilometres away from family. For some students this is very difficult and they find it hard emotionally being away from a supportive environment. A student living in Melbourne or away from their home may need to work part time to supplement their income, study, take care of himself or herself and try to develop a new network of friend and this can be extremely difficult. As a result students chose to learn closer to home or chose not to go at all. For those students who may live closer to a country university they still have the soaring costs of petrol, which can then prevent them from attending.

Many rural students defer their university placement for one-year hoping to earn the $17,500 required to qualify for Aus Study. However for many they cannot earn this amount even when they work full time or hold down two jobs so hence do not take up their university position. Some students also find that they work this gap year don’t make the required amount but go to university then find the added pressures of still having to work as well as study. The is a lot of pressure upon young people during their gap year to earn money and often they give up the decision to go to university as the pressure is too great.

It is common fact that many parents’ work out deals with local businesses or within there own business so that students can qualify for Aus Study. This then disadvantages the genuine ones whose parent’s are not able to arrange such deals.

Many parents’ earn too much money for their child to qualify for Aus study but don’t earn enough to allow the child to attend university. In some instances families re mortgage their homes to cover the cost of university or they sell their homes and relocate to Melbourne so that they are able to care for their children. This in turns often takes mature skilled people out of remote areas and can lead to a further shortage of skilled professionals in the work place.

Many rural families have struggled with drought, fires and floods and are unable to financially afford to consider further education for their children.

Single parent’s who have children who may be eligible to go to university are unable to afford the burden financially so that child may not attend.
Although universities offer scholarships to rural students there are only a few and not every child has the opportunity to receive this.

University students from country areas have higher rates of drop out and many suffer from depression due to the added pressure of living away from home and having to work part time whilst studying.

Rural and remote areas struggle for professional people and if we don’t provide some equality for our country students we will find a big shortage of professional workers wanting to live and work in country areas. (As is already the case with GP’s health care workers teachers etc)

Most university campuses are based in large regional centres or Melbourne. It still means that for some students access is expensive and difficult without relocating. For example a young person that resides in Bairnsdale the closest university is Monash at Churchill 1 ½ hours drive away. The only other option is to study through TAFE or externally if they do not wish to relocate. Not all TAFE colleges provide all courses so a young person may be required to do a course not really of their choosing.

Strategies to address barriers.

- Our students should have access to the education of their choice and be assisted financially to do so.
- We could consider providing an allowance to students who during their VCE years live more then 150 kilometres away from the university of their choice. This allowance should not be means tested but based on where that young person resided during their VCE years and be available for the student to complete one degree. This allowance may make things easier for the student and their family financially and reduce the pressures of having to work part time whilst studying.
- We need to increase the access to scholarships for rural students and that they not just be based on academic results.
- More places at universities with an emphasis on children from within our own state of Victoria being given first preference then universities consider overseas students or students from other states.
- Access to affordable accommodation options for students so if they take up a university placement they can afford to live in suitable housing.
- More support for young people from rural and remote areas within the universities and within their college of choice to assist them emotionally with the pressures and changes that may occur. (There are peer support programs for overseas students this needs to be expanded for rural and remote area students.)
- TAFE colleges need to have greater links to universities so that a large variety of courses can be offered so that young people have a variety of choices.
- More support to VCE students and their families from career teachers at secondary school about choices that are available and education around the reality of the costs involved with each choice.

Opportunity for higher education should be a right for all young people regardless of where they reside.

Helen Rawlings.