30 April 2008

Ms. Karen Ellingford
Executive Officer
Education and Training Committee
Parliament House
Spring Street
EAST MELBOURNE 3002

Dear Ms. Ellingford,

Re: Parliamentary Inquiry into Geographical Differences in the Rate in which Victorian Students Participate in Higher Education.

Please find attached the Rural City of Wangaratta’s submission to the above inquiry which we understand can still be received after 18 March 2008. It was developed by Council’s Education Advisory Committee.

The Committee represent all major education providers and the local community. They did not feel that they had the resources to undertake intensive research into the issue, but have knowledge of the local situation. The issue is an important one for regional residents and they believe it is important that they take this opportunity to make a submission.

Yours sincerely

Ann Heywood
Executive Manager – Social Planning
RESPONSE TO PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY INTO GEOGRAPHICAL DIFFERENCES IN THE RATE IN WHICH VICTORIAN STUDENTS PARTICIPATE IN HIGHER EDUCATION
RURAL CITY OF WANGARATTA

RESPONSE TO THE PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY INTO GEOGRAPHICAL DIFFERENCES IN THE RATE IN WHICH VICTORIAN STUDENTS PARTICIPATE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Background

The Rural City of Wangaratta is located 235 kilometres north east of Melbourne and has a population of approximately 28,000.

Wangaratta is the municipality’s largest urban centre with approximately 18,000. The city is at the centre of a rich and varied agricultural area. It is a service centre for the region, providing health and education services, it has diverse industry and is the regional headquarters for several State Government agencies.

The area is renowned for world class wines, gourmet food, spectacular scenery, links to Ned Kelly, Jazz Festival and easy access to State and National Parks.

As with most regional centres, the population is ageing. The Rural City has been active in attracting skilled migrants from overseas as well as residents from other areas of Victoria. Many young people leave after Year 12 students to pursue higher education, but statistics show that many people in their late 20s come here to live. It is recognised that higher education needs to provide opportunities for mature age students to study and further develop their careers within this region.

The Rural City has twenty one primary schools, three secondary schools and one specialist school. Wangaratta also has a campus of the Goulburn-Ovens Institute of TAFE, which is based in Shepparton. The Wangaratta campus provides a range of courses for local residents, as well as attracting other students to this area. The city also has a well established adult education centre, which provides outreach services to other areas.

The Rural School of Health of Melbourne University also has a presence, providing education to the doctors who undertake internships at North East Health, Wangaratta.

Access to higher education in the Rural City of Wangaratta

The nearest university campuses to this municipality are at Albury (Charles Sturt) and Wodonga (La Trobe), between 70 and 80 kilometres away. There is also a campus of Melbourne University at Shepparton.

A number of students from this municipality attend the Albury-Wodonga campuses. As they have grown, these campuses are teaching an increasing number of courses which often focus on professional disciplines needed in regional Australia, including health, agriculture, environment and business. They provide a valuable opportunity for local people (both
school leavers and mature age) to increase their skills without leaving this region. However, they do not teach the full range of courses that are provided at metropolitan campuses and so are not an option for all students.

Travel to these campuses is an issue unless students have a car and this creates particular difficulties for young people who have just completed Year 12. Both campuses are situated on the fringes of Albury-Wodonga. Public transport options from Wangaratta are limited and may not provide the flexibility students need to access teaching or use the library, laboratories or other facilities out of hours.

Current train timetables allow travellers only 3 hours (approximately 12.30pm to 3.30 pm) in Albury or Wodonga. Train services are currently being disrupted due to deterioration of the track. More recently a bus service has been established, leaving Wangaratta at 6.45 am and returning at 7.45 pm. This is a long day – given the location of the campuses and their access to services.

Travel to these campuses is not possible without a car for students who live outside the urban area of Wangaratta as public transport in rural areas of this municipality is very limited and does not connect to the Albury-Wodonga services (again a particular difficulty for school leavers).

Choice of courses, travel difficulties and the desire of young adults to experience a more independent lifestyle mean that most students need to live elsewhere while they study, be it Melbourne or a regional city with a university campus.

**Issues for rural and regional students**

The fundamental difference for students whose families live in the metropolitan area and those whose families live in rural and regional areas is that the majority of metropolitan students have the opportunity to commute to a major university campus, while rural and regional students do not. While both metropolitan and regional students frequently choose to live independently or on campus, the fact that living at home is an option provides a safety net for urban families that regional families do not enjoy.

**Financial impact**

The cost of maintaining students in a hall of residence or independent accommodation while they attend university is an additional cost that rural families have no choice but to bear. Statistics indicate that incomes are generally lower and employment choices fewer for residents in regional areas. Yet no additional allowance for living costs or travel is made for students who cannot access tertiary education in their local area.

Access to Youth Allowance from Centrelink is means tested so many students are not eligible. Yet many middle income families struggle to support their children in higher education. Even in relatively affluent families, the costs of renting accommodation in the
city, travel, food, health costs or living in a college along with study costs may take a significant proportion of household income. Anecdotal evidence suggests a family must have income above the cut off point for the current means test to be able to meet these costs. The situation is worse where families have more than one child at university, other children being educated, other major financial commitments, such as mortgages or loss of income due to situations like prolonged drought. The cost of some courses or board in high status colleges is beyond the reach of many families meaning that the students are overwhelmingly from wealthier backgrounds.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that some students from low income families have withdrawn from study because they find that that Centrelink support is not adequate to meet their costs without additional family support (which their families cannot provide) or they feel unable to take up some of the opportunities university life offers. On the other hand, there is a perception that some wealthy families are able to structure their affairs so that their children are able to receive allowances (e.g. supporting their children to travel overseas for a year to they are classified as independent and, therefore, able to access Youth Allowance).

Some students from less affluent backgrounds may simply not consider studying. This is increasing as long term drought has put many rural families under stress, especially farming families and those running small businesses. The Rural City of Wangaratta Drought Response Committee has been informed of a decreased interest in pursuing tertiary education among Year 11 and 12 students. These students recognise the situation their family is in and choose not to further their studies because they do not want to create additional stress for their families. The reasoning behind their decision is not always explained to their families.

Recent studies have shown that many young students are subsidising their costs by working long hours, which can have a substantial impact on the time they have for study, their social connectedness, links to their family and general wellbeing. While it is good for students to undertake part time work, students need to give priority to studying if they – and the wider community - are to gain the most benefit form their education.

**Wellbeing impact**

While many rural students see moving to the city as a rite of passage, the reality of being away from home and support networks can be a challenge for many young people. Most have had limited experience and many struggle in their first year and may give up their studies.

The added stress of financial insecurity or working long hours to survive can make the problem worse as they need opportunities to develop new social networks and to come home to visit their families.
Students who study within commuting distance of home do not have the same pressure to find accommodation and relocate in a period of a few weeks that rural students experience. They also have more capacity to leave unsuitable accommodation if they choose.

Other models

We recognise that it is not feasible to build campuses in every regional centre and that doing so would not be useful in terms of increasing the access to higher education for rural students (especially those completing Year 12) because:

- Their chosen course may not be offered at their local campus; and
- Many want to experience city life and this is an important life experience, contributing to their overall growth

However, we believe that other models can be developed that help support or provide a safety net to higher education for both school leavers and mature age students in regional areas. These include strategies such as:

- Increased provision of first year university courses linked to local education providers. This would reduce pressure on families and could allow students to become more mature and/or save money prior to leaving home as well as allowing them to continue studies if they return home.
- Provision of study centres (in conjunction with existing education providers) to support off campus study or e-learning for more isolated students. These could support students to access a range of courses not available at regional campuses.
- A local education model/facility which allows students to access courses from a number of universities, rather than the provision of a single university campus.

The Rural City of Wangaratta has developed an Education Strategy. Two of the objectives of the Strategy are that Wangaratta should focus on becoming:

- a recognised national centre of technical excellence in education and training.
- a regional exemplar in e-learning at all levels.

The city has begun to progress along this path. It is the location for the first Technical Education Centre (TEC) in Victoria and we understand that it is the largest. When this Strategy was developed, technical education was an unmet need in this region. While community consultation often identifies a perceived need for a university campus to be developed here, we recognised that there are already three regional university campuses within 80 kilometres and we should focus on other needs that complement these developments. However, we believe that a focus on technical education has many aspects and strong links have to be developed between technical and higher education to allow for different career pathways.
We also have established a modern library facility which serves both students and the community that can form the basis of future e-learning, with the support of existing education providers.

Conclusion

Our submission is that students (especially those from Year 12) from regional Victoria are disadvantaged in terms of access to higher education because of the relatively higher costs associated with this. This (together with HECS debt) is resulting in individuals deciding not to pursue higher education for financial reasons. This may have a cost to individuals, their community and the wider society in a world where education and economic wellbeing are closely linked.

We believe that there is a need to review existing financial support to students. This should include considering providing more flexible and generous support to students from regional areas who do not have any option but to leave home for study. Such support should be means tested, but include consideration of the actual costs of supporting a student away from home and the costs of supporting other dependents. This will ensure decisions on future study and career options are not limited by family resources.

We believe that the further development of courses in existing campuses in regional Victoria is important as it provides opportunities for ongoing study in the regions, both for mature age students and school leavers. However, this needs to be complemented by developing more flexible approaches which enable access to a range of courses and outreach support for students of all ages in regional areas who do not have access to a campus.