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

Dear Ms. Ellingford,

RE: Response to Parliamentary Inquiry into Geographical Differences in the Rate in which Victorian Students Participate in Higher Education

Council welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Parliamentary Inquiry into Geographical Differences in the Rate in which Victorian Students Participate in Higher Education.

The Shire of Melton is considered an ‘Interface Council’ in that it is one of the nine Councils that lie at the interface of metropolitan Melbourne and rural Victoria, sharing aspects of both urban and rural communities.

Compared to metropolitan Melbourne, young people living in Interface municipalities¹,

- Are more likely to leave school earlier;
- Are less likely to complete Year 12;
- Have lower TER scores;
- Are less likely to attend post secondary education; and
- Are more likely to disengage from school and employment
- Overall a high proportion of young people demonstrated self-harm behaviours and indicated they had depressive symptoms.

At the time the Staying Connected: solutions for addressing service gaps for young people living at the Interface (September 2006) report was prepared, eight of the nine Interface municipalities were ranked in the top 11 of metropolitan Councils for the lowest levels of educational achievement.²

¹ Staying Connected: solutions for addressing service gaps for young people living at the Interface (September 2006) page 4
² ibid page 4
The Shire of Melton is a rapidly developing area of approximately 527 square kilometres and is located in the outer west of Melbourne, approximately 40 kilometres west of the Melbourne GPO and is a designated growth municipality. The Shire recorded some of the fastest population growth rates in Australia in recent years. Between 2001 and 2006 the population of the municipality increased from 51,686 to 78,275; an increase of 26,585 people.

The population of the Shire can be considered to be essentially young with 29.3% of the population aged between 0 and 17 at the 2006 ABS Census, which was higher than the same age group in the Melbourne Statistical Division (MSD 22.9%).

In common with other Interface Council areas, young people in the Shire of Melton tend to leave school earlier, are less likely to complete year 12 or equivalent and are less likely to attend tertiary education or vocational training. Analysis of the highest level of schooling attained by the population in Melton Shire in 2006 compared to the MSD shows that there was a larger proportion of people who left school at an early level (year 10 or earlier) but a smaller proportion of people who completed year 12 or equivalent. Statistics show that students in the Shire of Melton left school in greater percentages in years 9, 10 and 11 (7.9%; 18.8% and 15.5% respectively) than in the MSD (6.1%; 14.0% and 12.5% respectively) and that a smaller percentage of students in Melton Shire completed year 12 or equivalent (40.3% compared to MSD 48.6%).

As at the 2006 Census 52% of Melton Shire residents did not hold any qualifications (MSD 45.9%) and 18.8% did not have a vocational qualification (MSD 14.1%). In addition a significantly smaller percentage of residents in Melton Shire hold a Diploma, Bachelor or Higher degree (16.6% compared with MSD 27.2%).

Major differences between the occupations of the population of Melton Shire and the MSD were:

- Machinery Operators And Drivers 11.2% (MSD 6.4%);
- Technicians and Trades Workers 17.1% (MSD 13.6%);
- Professionals 12.5% (MSD 22.5%), and;
- Managers 9.5% (MSD 12.5%).

In 2006, 7.2% of students across the Shire attended secondary school, a larger proportion than for those students attending secondary school in the MSD (6.6%), however a smaller proportion of Melton Shire students were engaged in tertiary level education than for the MSD (4.0% and 7.0% respectively). During recent consultations with local schools, some students (some still in primary school) commented that they would not be going to university because they came from a certain suburb or area of Melton Township. Further investigation is needed to determine whether low educational and occupational aspirations contribute to a low value being placed on education and training. Schools within the Shire of Melton consistently report high levels of absenteeism (parent approved absences as opposed to truancy) with student averages up to 20 days absence per year (four school weeks) supporting the notion that the pursuit of learning or an education may not be held highly by some families. Local schools have collectively responded to the high level of absenteeism by implementing a campaign that encouraged parents to reduce the number of days their children would be absent from school.

Poor public transport infrastructure is a potential barrier to young people participating in higher learning and vocational training. Access to local higher education and training opportunities within the Shire of Melton is very limited. With most of the higher education and training opportunities located away from the Shire many young people have to rely on public transport to get to and from their places of study or training. Therefore, to pursue
learning pathways and capitalise on the learning and training options and venues available to them, many young people have to travel out of the municipality using public transport.

For many young people this means early starts to the day, inconvenient travel times, long distances to travel, the need to change forms of transport (train to bus etc) and the need to comply with a service that at times has poor connections resulting in frustrating delays. Council provides a low cost bus service that transports people from the municipality to key learning and training venues and transport hubs in the western region of Melbourne however improved transport infrastructure is urgently required.

Council has established the Shire of Melton Community Learning Board and has recently developed a new Community Learning Plan which identifies and attempts to address barriers to participation in learning (enclosed). Council recognises, and values all aspects of learning and education. A key goal of the Council Plan is ‘to increase the number of people studying across all age groups in Melton Shire Council’.

Council is particularly concerned about school retention rates and the levels of participation of young people in tertiary education, which are lower than those of the Melbourne Statistical Division, reducing employment pathways and options for young people and therefore commends the undertaking of this Parliamentary Inquiry and looks forward to receiving information in relation to the findings of the Inquiry.

Yours sincerely,

LYNETTE GREEN
ACTING COMMUNITY SUPPORT AND DEVELOPMENT MANAGER

Enc: Shire of Melton Community Learning Plan 2008 - 2010