Southern Grampians Youth Network

Presentation to the State Parliament of Victoria Education and Training Committee
Inquiry into the Geographic Differences in the Rate in which Victorian Students Participate in Higher Education

28 April 2008

This submission has been prepared by the Southern Grampians Youth Network (SGYN) on behalf of parents who are have, or have had, or hope to have, children attending university beyond this region.

The SGYN is an informal network of representatives from organisations working in the youth service areas in health, welfare, education and recreation, as well as community representatives. There are approximately 40 organisations associated with the network, which is convened by three organisations: Glenelg Southern Grampians LLEN, RMIT University, Hamilton and Glenelg Southern Grampians Primary Care Partnerships.

The views in this presentation were canvassed from parents who belong to the network, and parents from within the wider community of Southern Grampians. The parents’ views are representative of those of many rural families – some of whom are single parents, some from farming backgrounds and some belonging to two income earning families. Some have children who are the first in their families to attend university, and some come from professional families with a tradition of higher education.

The issues raised were consistent and parents were strong-minded in their concerns for the obstacles they and their children face in aspiring to a university education and a professional career.

The most consistent critical issue was cost.

Cost

The obvious geographical obstacle to rural young people participating in higher education is the associated expense of living away from home. Having a child studying elsewhere means the maintenance of two (at least) households. Parents estimated the extra burden to their finances (after tax) ranged from $15,000 to $30,000. This does not include repaying HECS debts.

Parents commented that rural students studying in the city had to constantly juggle part-time jobs whilst studying. This affects their attitude, their study, their health, their social life. It can mean they don’t have opportunities to visit back home regularly. In addition, they don’t have the benefits of full-time work – no sick pay for example, or choice of shifts.

To qualify for Youth Allowance, young people must earn around $18k in 18 months from last day of school. This means students frequently forgo study to work up to three jobs to earn the preconditions for once schooling is completed and prior to University commencing. There is no down-time between year 12 study and university to relax and recharge.

If they choose during a GAP year, to do a traineeship, which would give them a qualification, probably wouldn’t pay enough to qualify for the $18,000 within the allocated time frame. Consequently they will be again juggling jobs to make up the shortfall, or seek assistance from their parent/s.

The Youth Allowance (up to $231 per week) is not sufficient to support young people living away from home to study at university. They still need to work a part-time job, or jobs, or to obtain subsidy from their parents. However they can only earn up to $6,000 a year before their Youth Allowance is cut.

Apparently this has not been indexed in 15 years – how much has fuel and household costs risen in that time?

The ripple out affect is to the parents who have to continue to work to make up the shortfall. In rural Victoria where young people from farming families in drought need to leave to study, the financial burden is enormously stressful. The choice of off-farm work for farming parents is limited. Young people from farms are aware of the situation and take it upon themselves not to ask for further help because they know their parents don’t have the resources. This spirals into further stress and depression. Families in rural towns are also affected by the drought.
Parents commented on the amount of money being diverted away from rural communities. If 150 students leave the Hamilton region for higher education each year, and are supported by their families at a cost of around $20,000, this means a loss of income or investment to the community of approximately $3 million annually. This has a multiplier affect on the town.

Given that regional communities experience on average lower per capita incomes, this also has a bearing on the cost of supporting a child living away from home to study.

The parents are looking at approximately $60,000 (over three to four years) invested in living away from home costs for one child – which in turn they cannot invest in their community in other ways, or invest in their own retirement. They work longer – and some commented this has an impact on their capacity to volunteer in their community.

GAP Year

Some parents commented that when their child deferred, they didn’t always take up their university offers the following year, citing lack of ambition, enjoying the money and not wanting to be financially poor, loss of study habit, different groups of friends, and so on.

Emotional

When students have to leave home to access higher education they also have to leave the emotional support of family and friends. This can adversely affect their health and their attitude to study. For many, it’s the first time they leave home. Some are unable to continue study because they are depressed. Many commented on homesickness impacting on study performance. The transitions required for these young people far exceed those simply changing schools. Our children will need to negotiate a new physical environment to study in, work in and live in, without the aid of their support networks.

Parents also mentioned safety and security when young people study in the city. Theft and assaults and a sense of vulnerability impacted on young people’s attitudes and capacity for resilience. This was in contrast to their relatively safe rural community.

In rural communities the high achieving young people are highly visible, well supported and respected. When they become one of thousands, they lose their sense of identity. They are vulnerable and at risk of harmful behaviours and influences, or drop out because they can’t cope with their changed circumstances. They are on a steep learning curve – for some, they are just not ready for this complete change in environment. Due to all the associated costs (setting up etc, the farewell from home), its not easy to be flexible or resilient enough to re-engage at university.

For many, the connection to home is maintained by belonging to a sporting club. However, the cost and time of travel can prevent this. Most small communities in this region have had football and netball teams fold or merge because of the lack of young players. This further reduces the choices and options for young people living in or returning to rural areas. (rural teams must be the only ones where the father and son rule applies to the fathers!) On the other hand, the costs of students participating in sporting teams at their university are huge in comparison to rural costs – and again must be borne by parents or students’ part-time work.

Weekend travel arrangements back to home in rural areas are inflexible – for example travelling from Hamilton back to Melbourne via public transport on a Sunday – 2 services, both depart within 20 mins of each other late Sunday afternoon.
- Cost – approx $38 concession.
- Cost of petrol – approx. $70 – or more.

Parents made the point that often university timetabling increased the frustration, citing examples where students had to be back in Melbourne for a 9 am lecture – the only one scheduled for the day, or the last lectures being held late Fridays, thus causing them to miss the bus.

Choices

Lack of tertiary education choice locally requires young people to seek courses elsewhere. Parents felt that rural young people were more likely to seek a regional university – but it depended on what they want to study. There needs to be more flexible study arrangements so students have the choice to access on-site
study from where they live. Whilst some thrive and do well, and cope with the experience of studying away, for many potentially high achieving young adults, their life aspirations are severely handicapped because they simply do not have a choice.

Where family aspirations are not encouraging of a tertiary education, some people commented that rural young people were less likely to be in a position to take up further education in their chosen area in some other way (such as night school or a TAFE offering suitable academic choices). They said if these young people lived in Melbourne, further education options were still possible – but to access these opportunities from a rural area would be very hard, without support from parents. Many felt that studying by distance was not an option for these young people – as it was too isolating and they would not have the necessary support.

A concern put forward during this consultation concerned the aspirations of academically able children whose parents who made decisions early based on financial constraints that higher education was beyond their reach. The view was that such young people may misbehave, or disengage from school before they reach their upper years. Parents commented further that this also represented a loss of human capital.

Many were pleased that RMIT in Hamilton provided an opportunity for young and mature age people to study locally – and noted the flexibility of study arrangements. However, not everyone wants to do nursing, which is the only undergraduate program offered. Further, some parents noted a stigma or perception that regional campuses were second rate.

Perceptions can be damaging. There is a strong opinion held locally in some quarters that young people should go away and experience the city lights. Few would disagree with broadening life experiences, it is not always financially or culturally possible for young people to have the choice. Some are ready at different stages of their lives. Further, we cannot predict that young people studying elsewhere will return to the region – we hope they will, but they may not.

This all contributes to an erosion of human capital in rural areas – the ability to attract and retain professionals – it is a continuing cycle.

Suggestions parents made included:

- universities to consider the needs of better for rural students when timetabling;
- include in discussions around tertiary affordability the cost of rural students living away from home costs – discussions are too often focussed on HECS repayment;
- more flexible transport costs;
- alterations to qualifications for living away from home youth allowances;
- taxation arrangements assisting genuine education support costs to parents of rural students studying away from home;
- consider and promote more rural and regional study options – to rural and city students.

Prepared by Southern Grampians Youth Network and the Glenelg Southern Grampians LLEN on behalf of parents in the Hamilton region.

SGYN Chair: Kaye Scholfield
SGS LLEN: Michael Date, Gail Law (Phone 55719302)

Parents' Inquiry representatives: Deborah Howcroft, Lena McCormack, Mike Wagg