Submission to Parliamentary Inquiry into Geographical Differences in the Rate in Which Victorian Students Participate in Higher Education 19 May 2008

South Gippsland Bass Coast Region
Summary of issues and opportunities (not in any order of priority)

1. Skills shortages are providing other options – employers of these options should encourage further education

2. Transport (lack of) – Transport Connections Projects make access to higher education opportunities a priority

3. Service provision in South Gippsland Bass Coast generally is lacking however local developments – Bass Coast Shire Education Strategy, Leongatha Education Precinct, Southern and Coastal Alliance of TAFE, ACE initiative, Phillip Island Nature Parks – have potential to effect higher education – these should be supported

4. Engagement of large employers is low – larger employers require encouragement and support

5. Career and transition advice is inadequate – additional support required including through and to mentoring programs

6. Demise of Melbourne University presence – support for greater university presence required

7. 2006 Parliamentary Inquiry into Retaining Young People in Rural Towns and Communities – revisit and pursue recommendations with renewed vigour

8. Extending role of LLENs – charter/responsibilities could be extended beyond post compulsory options 16-19 year olds to higher education options

9. Socio-economic factors including impact of drought – additional assistance to families and students with little means

10. Responses to recent and current reviews e.g. DEECD Blueprint for Early Childhood development and School Reform, “LLENs Beyond 2008” project and Gippsland Apprenticeship Research report – should be used to inform Inquiry

11. Submissions of VASSP and YACVIC - support
Background Context

Deferral rates in South Gippsland and Bass Coast have risen from 11.7% in 2004 to 18.9% in 2006 with some schools seeing nearly ¼ of all students offered a university place deferring. Statistically, across the state, 85% of students actually take up this university offer the following year and our experience is that this would be about right for our region. (source on track data: 2003-2007).

A number of reasons are cited for the deferral from the students and have been recorded in the on track data over the past few years. However, our experience cites the following two major reasons for deferral.

1) financial. Given that Youth Allowance is given on a sliding scale where the amount reduces when a family income reaches $31400 at $1 in every $4 over that amount, it does not take a very high family income for students to be non eligible for financial assistance. (rang Centrelink today Morwell Office to verify exact amount) (see attached eligibility requirement from Centrelink website sourced 15/5/08). If a student is out of school and working for 18 months, they are assessed as independent from the parental income test and therefore get independent allowance. It should be further noted that it is unlikely that students would be able to commute to University from the region and therefore need to leave home to attend.

2) Students need a break. Many students cite the financial reasons but also state that they need a break from study for a while. However, this means that as a community we need to ensure that we can provide constructive activities for these students to participate in that ideally adds value to their chosen future. Bear in mind that a traineeship wage alone, does not qualify a student for independent youth allowance (see below) if that is their only income in a ‘gap’ year.

From Centrelink Website

You are considered independent if you are aged 16 or over and:

- have been out of school at least 18 months and earned an amount equivalent to 75 per cent of the maximum rate of pay under Wage Level A of the Australian Pay and Classification Scale in an 18 month period before lodging a claim, or
- have worked to support yourself for at least 18 months, working full-time at least 30 hours a week during the preceding two years (or for a period or periods of 12 months if you are considered disadvantaged), or
- have worked part-time for at least 15 hours a week for at least two years since last leaving school, or
- are 25 or more and a full-time student (in special circumstances), or
- have been assessed as having a partial capacity to work as determined by a Job Capacity Assessment (or a Better Assessment completed before 1 July 2006). You will be assessed as independent only for the period you are assessed as having a partial capacity to work. Please Note: This criteria does not apply if you are undertaking full-time education or an Australian Apprenticeship.
**Issues/Opportunities**

**Skills Shortages**

The building and construction industry is strong in the region particularly in Bass Coast as a consequence of its continuing high population growth rate. Consequently many young people have available to them locally good secure employment options that are an attractive alternative to higher education. Employers of and organisations training these young people should be assisted in encouraging and providing opportunities for the young people to pursue higher education.

**Transport**

The lack of transport is constantly raised as a major problem for young people. Whilst Monash University does have campuses at Churchill (Gippsland) and Berwick there is no direct public transport link to either. This is both a logistical and economic barrier to participation in higher education. There is an opportunity for local Transport Connections projects to make access to higher education a key priority in rural areas.

**Service provision to South Gippsland Bass Coast**

Generally the region is regarded as lacking in service provision and this is equally true in respect of higher education. Whilst several TAFEs, RTOs and universities have a presence in the region these are local campuses or activity remote from their main location and focus. The local entities are to be congratulated on their efforts and do the best they can but operate under constraints of economies of scale.

However there currently exists through three local initiatives that may provide opportunities to encourage and facilitate the taking up of higher education by young people in the region. These initiatives are:

1. **Bass Coast Shire Education Strategy**

   The Plan was launched recently and aims to enhance the health, wellbeing and prosperity of individuals and community through learning and ensuring that the region is able to respond to the demands of a growing population and requirements for a range of skills and knowledge. Supporting the Plan is an action plan with four objectives:
   - to promote the value of a lifelong "learning culture" to individuals and the community
   - to support the environmental sustainability of the Shire through education
   - to advocate and facilitate the provision of quality accessible education, training and learning facilities
   - to contribute to the economic prosperity of Bass Coast through the provision of a broad range of education and training options

   A strengthened university presence is an essential part of this planning. The difference a university presence in terms of changing culture, improving facilities and economic prosperity is immense.

2. **Leongatha Education Precinct (LEP)**

   In 2005 a proposal was developed for the establishment of an education precinct in Leongatha. The concept of the precinct is co-location on one site, where that is possible, and significant levels of co-operation and collaboration amongst local education providers and stakeholders. Parties to the precinct are Leongatha Secondary College, Leongatha Primary School, South Gippsland Specialist, Central Gippsland Institute of TAFE, Education centre Gippsland, South Gippsland Bass Coast Local Learning & Employment Network, Monash University, DEECD and South Gippsland Shire. Significant progress has been made including master planning of the whole site, construction of new Specialist School, funding for Skills Centre, pending commencement of new TAFE Campus, recognition of site in Council planning and consideration...
as a site for a Trade Training Centre. It is understood that a separate presentation will be made in respect of the LEP.

3. Southern and Coastal Alliance of TAFE

In 2006 the Southern and Coastal TAFE Alliance was formed. This was a partnership between the Leongatha Campus of GippsTAFE and Wonthaggi Campus of Chisholm Institute. The intention of the Alliance was to improve educational services to its communities, build on current local industry and community partnerships, encourage further enterprise and fee for service activity, cooperative delivery, shared profile planning activities, minimise duplication of services, increase collaboration, enhance professional development, wider range of programs, transition of students between campuses etc. There is an opportunity to build aspirations/expectations of young people by the provision of pathways from TAFE to university. TAFE Diplomas or Advanced Diplomas may articulate or provide credit to higher education. This may well save infrastructure costs but require changes to the current TAFE funding model a matter raised in Minister Allan’s Discussion paper on Skills Reform - “Securing our Future Economic Prosperity”.

4. ACE initiative

Three ACE providers in Bass Coast have agreed to deliver an accredited course Certificate 2 in Business. In a disseminated mode at local ACE centres, under the auspice and scope of registration of ECG, using e-technology in delivery. Such initiatives can provide avenues into higher education.

5. Phillip Island Nature Parks

More collaboration with organisations that have modern infrastructure and that are leading the way in environmental, conservation and sustainable practice at a higher education level. A good example of this is the Phillip Island Nature Parks. The PINPs is already a substantial yet sometimes unacknowledged provider a substantial range of education programs to students from primary level, secondary level (including apprenticeships and student work placement through to higher education (research) with links to several higher education institutions. However there is an opportunity to build on this. Access to world class facilities (including a proposed sustainability centre), knowledge and leading research would add value to students’ education experience and encouragement to continue on to higher education. Moreover at a local level an enhanced level of engagement would provide increased an impetus to achieve the Bass Coast Shire Education Plan’s Objective 3 in relation to provision of quality, accessible education, training and learning facilities

All three initiatives provide the opportunity for the planning for and development of a significant higher education presence in the region. All three should be encouraged and supported by government (federal and state) and higher education institutions, to the extent of becoming priority initiatives.

Engagement of large employers

Research over two years indicates that the larger employers (other than large supermarkets and retailers) employ very few 15-19 year olds. The reason often given is that these young people do not have the skills and qualifications (usually obtained through higher education) required for the available positions. Although Monash Gippsland has entered into a partnership with the Gippsland Southern Health Service this requires further encouragement. An opportunity exists for greater engagement between these employers and higher education providers to develop education partnerships supported by state or federal government funding particularly in areas of skills shortages.

Career Advice “Career and Transition Services in South Gippsland and Bass Coast”
In 2007 the SGBCLLEN LLEN conducted a small research project that drew attention to the following:

- Careers teachers do not have enough time to be able to be available for quality one-on-one careers advice time with the majority of their students in Years 9 through 12.
- There are significant shortfalls in career activity directed towards individuals in Year 7 and 8 students due to constraints on time available and the demands of other school programs on both teachers and students.
- The area of most interest is that of “straight up” individual careers and transition counselling i.e. someone available to discuss types of careers, education and training pathways, longer term extension options of the chosen career, individual suitability to a career and the individual’s socio-economic reality of pursuing a specific career choice.
- There is a lack of options for parents, carers, and young people generally for consistent, accessible and comprehensive career advice, individual assistance and guidance.

Given the need for adequate career and transition support to explore opportunities including higher education opportunities more resources should be directed to this area. Without adequate support young people have inadequate information and are unable to explore all career options (including higher education) properly. We would suggest that a suitably qualified and experienced person be engaged to act as a roving careers and transition advisor working on a daily rotational basis at each of the secondary school across South Gippsland and Bass Coast funded by State and Federal government.

We also suggest that greater support be provided to youth mentoring programs. These type of programs can provide the means of young people gaining information and assistance about pathways and encouraging higher aspirations and expectations including to go on to University. The Bass Coast South Gippsland Youth mentoring program is an example where a mentoring program has shifted emphasis to careers and transition support.

Demise of Melbourne University Presence

In 2005 Melbourne University withdrew its presence in South Gippsland by effectively closing its MacMillan campus operations in Leongatha in the face of serious local concerns about the impact of such a move. This effectively closed the door on local participation with a university that provided articulation into higher education programs in an area of high economic dependency (agriculture). It also removed a visible university presence. This action may well have acted as a disincentive for young people to consider higher education options and certainly did not enhance the reputation of higher education in the area. NCDEA has now commenced delivery of agricultural courses in Leongatha. SBAs have increased from 5 to 15 with 10 new enrolments in 2008. The importance of a skilled agriculture employment in South Gippsland cannot be underestimated given the importance of the area as a food bowl and the demand to increase productivity in the face of climate change. Higher education opportunities are essential to this and recognised by Federal government in emerging skills shortages. An opportunity exists for Universities to become actively engaged in planning of and delivery from the proposed Trade Training Centres, particularly in respect of pathways.

2006 Parliamentary Inquiry – Retaining Young People in Rural Towns & Communities

This extensive Inquiry made many recommendations that related to higher education and education and training generally. All of these recommendations were supported or supported in part by the government. The recommendations of particular relevance to higher education were 12, 14, 16, 17, 18, 19, 25, 26-31, 32, 34, 35, 36, 41, 42, 44, 45. In addition the Victorian State Government’s Top 40 Actions contain initiatives in respect of higher education. An opportunity exists for government to revisit and review progress of implementation of these recommendations/actions with renewed vigour and focus.

Extending Role of LLENs
Currently the LLENs core role of brokering collaborative is focussed on 15-19 year olds at risk of disengagement or disengaged from education and training, and transition pathways into post compulsory opportunities but not higher education opportunities. Consideration might be given to extending this role to also focus on transitions pathways to higher education as this is more that legitimate pathway that should also be made available to young people at risk. This aspect should be considered in the current Blueprint Inquiry and LLENs Beyond 2008 project. Such a move would bring the considerable expertise and established collaborative arrangements brokered by the LLENs to the effort of increasing participation into higher education.

(Include above in Blueprint)

Socio – Economic background

The region is generally regarded as having a poor socio economic status. Qualifications of parents is low, particularly university qualifications a situation whereby parents are unlikely to encourage their children to pursue higher education. It is generally acknowledged that there is a lack of a learning culture in the region.

The well documented research indicating that socio economic is a major reason for not going onto higher education applies as much to this region as it does to the rest of rural Victoria. Little can be added to this already established fact.

Impact of drought

The number of 15 – 19 year olds on Youth Allowance increased by 66 from 98 in November 2006 to 164 in October 2007 compared to decrease of 1172 from 9989 to 8816 for the whole of Victoria for the same period. It is understood that this dramatic increase and reversal compared to the state-wide trend coincides with the time when farmers became eligible for drought assistance and parental income test was removed from the youth allowance criteria. This would appear to compound the already documented reason for rural students not taking up university study – economic. It may also be that the young people are staying on the farm to help their parents get through tough times, or are leaving home to ease the burden on already overburdened parents. Whilst this is point in time data it is believed that students may be deferring because of economic hardship caused by drought.

Other Submissions/Reports

It is also suggested that this review also consider the findings and recommendations of the recent Gippsland Apprenticeship Research report by Monash University. Whilst this report is largely about why apprentices are not completing their apprenticeships the factors may be contributing to a poor perception of education and training (including higher education) generally in the region which does not help in developing a culture of learning where this is already low.

An opportunity exists to consider the responses to the DEECD discussion paper “Blueprint for Early Childhood Development and School Reform” and “LLENs Beyond 2008” project to inform the Inquiry and in development integrated ways of increasing participation in higher education.

The Recommendations of the Victorian Association of Secondary School Principals and YACVIC are in general supported