Parliamentary Inquiry into Geographical Differences in the rate in which Victorian students participate in Higher Education.

Response from South West Local Learning and Employment Network (SWLLEN)

The South West Local Learning and Employment Network (SWLLEN) provides the following response to the Parliamentary Inquiry into Geographical Differences in the rate in which Victorian students participate in Higher Education.

This response draws together feedback from the membership of the SWLLEN and is endorsed by the board of the SWLLEN. Given there is much quantitative data and formal academic research already available to the Inquiry; this response focuses most strongly on qualitative data that considers why students in the South West have a poorer rate of participation in higher education than their metropolitan counterparts.

The SWLLEN provides its response under the headings of each point from the Inquiry's Terms of Reference, and provides some key recommendations to the Inquiry in the final section.

About SWLLEN

The South West Local Learning and Employment Network (SWLLEN) is a community network of local education providers, industry, community and government organisations and individuals, working together to improve education, training and employment outcomes for young people in the South West of Victoria.

The SWLLEN region comprises of the local government areas of Colac-Otway, Corangamite, Moyne and Warrnambool.

1) Variations in the number and type of university applications, offers, acceptances and completions in different metropolitan, rural and regional areas.

General Statistics

As the Inquiry will be aware, On Track data shows that participation rates in higher education by students from South West Victoria is significantly less than the state average. Less than 30% of south-west students who completed Year 12 in 2006 enrolled in University, compared to a Victorian average of 47%. The south west figure is even lower when compared to students from Melbourne’s Inner Eastern suburbs who have a University enrollment rate as high as 74%.

One of our members notes that in Colac “rates of success of our year 12 completers/qualifiers are good, however, applications for both TAFE and university places have been declining. Offer rates remain good but acceptance rates are declining year by year.”
Deferments

SWLLEN particularly draws the Inquiry's attention to the trend for students in the South West to accept, and then defer tertiary places at a much higher rate than metropolitan students.

Research conducted for the SWLLEN in 2004 asked government school students in South West Victoria “why did you defer?”

This research showed that most deferrals were for metropolitan university places. The most common reason given for high deferral rates for country students was the high cost of tertiary education and the subsequent desire to qualify for the youth allowance.

The research also showed that there is a propensity to enrol in a different course when the student eventually takes up their university place. Indeed this may demonstrate a benefit of deferment for some students to become clearer about their long term career interests.

Of significant concern, however, is that of those that defer, a number of these students did not subsequently take up the place offered.

A state-wide follow up study to SWLLEN's research has been funded by a number of regionally-based LLENs and the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (YACVic). This will provide comprehensive survey-based evidence on choice, access and affordability issues for regional and rural students. It is estimated this research will be available in June/July 2008. It is our understanding that this enquiry has already received a submission regarding this research project.

2) Influences of school retention rates, including enrolments and completions for VCE, VCAL and VET in schools on participation in higher education.

The Apparent Retention Rate (ARR) in Barwon South West (BSW), as published in the March 2008 edition of Summary Statistics for Victorian Schools, was 69.2 for years 7-12. This is compared to 86.2 for metropolitan regions and 68.6 for non-metropolitan regions. Whilst the BSW rate is slightly higher than the average for non-metropolitan regions, it must be considered that it includes the figures for Geelong, which is much more similar to metropolitan Melbourne than rural and regional Victoria in profile.

SWLLEN members have the following to say in relation to the influence of retention rates for VCE, VCAL and VETIS:

“My understanding is that retention is increasing with the options of various pathways in the senior school, however, articulation to tertiary from VETIS and VCAL is minimal as these students are more likely to take up apprenticeships.” SWLLEN Member, March 2008

3) Influences of participation in other post-school pathways, including TAFE enrolments and take-up of apprenticeships or other employment opportunities, on participation in higher education.

Whilst SWLLEN certainly does not see a strong uptake of pathways other than higher education in the South West as a bad thing, as one of our members remarked, the good “level of TAFE enrolments, apprenticeships and employment has had a marked impact on the participation on higher education in the South West.”

Access to provision is crucial to uptake of any post compulsory study. For example, one member from Colac noted “we do have an increasing cohort of young people seeking the ACE sector for delivery of post-compulsory education. There is severe under representation of TAFE opportunity in our area.” A larger discussion on access to provision can be found in section four.

Anecdotal evidence and longitudinal studies (i.e. OnTrack) have also identified that participating in other post school options are a valid pathway to a cheaper education. For example, there is evidence to suggest that many south west students attend TAFE to undertake a qualification that will provide them with advance standing for attending University. The downside of this alternative pathway however, is that the further away from, and the longer it takes for a young person to achieve their end goal, the less likely it is that they will get there.

4) Potential geographic, economic, social, cultural and other influences on university applications, offers, acceptances and completions across Victorian communities.

“travelling to university is the major impediment to tertiary education, particularly university. The local university campus has a limited number of courses, thus those seeking greater choice seek the Melbourne option. This requires relocation and thus expense. Even those taking up other regional university campus options are faced with relocation and thus associated expenses.” SWLLEN Member, March 2008

High costs, reduced local provision, transport barriers, relocation obstacles and lowered aspirations are all significant barriers for our South West students in completing higher education. We will consider each of these factors in more detail in this section.

Cost

SWLLEN believes that the most crucial factor that influences participation in higher education by students from South West Victoria is cost.

Costs are largely linked to lack of access to higher education due to limited or no provision in their local area, therefore leaving them with two expensive options if they are to participate in higher education:

- travelling long distances regularly with the expenses associated with public or private transport
• relocating to metropolitan areas with the expense of living in accommodation outside their family home

(there will be more on both these particular points further on)

These costs are of course coupled with the already considerable expenses that all higher education students must face such as textbooks and enrolment fees. If students and their families do take on the cost of relocating to attend higher education, it is less likely that they can afford to pay their HECS up-front, nor could they afford to access fee-paying places.

High costs for students wishing to participate in higher education is of course not confined to students in South West Victoria. In the 2006 On Track data, one in six regional students chose to defer, compared to one in fifteen from Melbourne, and the high cost of tertiary study was the major reason cited by regional students.

A substantial national study by Godden looked at issues relating to access to tertiary education for regional young people. It found that financial difficulties of studying away from home were exacerbated by the failure of the youth allowance to address the needs of regional Australia.

A method of quantifying the costs of tertiary study is contained in the On Line Cost Calculator designed by the Australian Scholarship Group. This indicates that rural students who move away from home to study will pay double the costs of city students over the duration of their study.

CASE STUDY

One of our members recently spoke with a young person (20 years old) who is studying full time, is her mother’s carer but has moved from home due to the stress related to 24 hour care. She now travels from Warrnambool where she is studying, to Port Fairy to look after her Mum. She has moved in with her boyfriend (an apprentice) and received the youth allowance, health care card and rent assistance until last week when her boyfriend’s apprenticeship moved from being 2nd year to 3rd year, and he received a pay rise. She contacted Centrelink to report their rise in income, and they told her that she no longer is eligible for any support as his income is too high (he will now gross $498 per week). She had aspirations of possibly going to university next year but now does not see that as an option due to the financial hardship they would be under and with the added expenses related to university rather than TAFE. She is too young for Austudy which would be an option if she was 25. She commented that it was incredible that people can sit and do nothing and get lots of support yet those who try and get skills for work and life get no support.

The bottom line is that many students cannot afford to attend higher education courses of their choice. Of those who can, the financial impact on themselves and their families is significant and certainly much greater than on those living in metropolitan areas.

Provision

As one of our members notes “Young people are required to leave their communities to attend higher education due to limited or no choices locally.”

Obviously there are lower levels of higher education provision in non-metropolitan areas. Some regional centres, such as Warrnambool, are fortunate to have a university
however the offerings available at regional universities are lower compared to the number and type of courses available at a metropolitan university.

Online provision of higher education does not seem to be considered as a serious option for students in South West Victoria. Whether this is related to poor access to broadband, the cost of ISPs, the autonomy required to study off campus or the skill set required to access higher education online is unclear. Even if it was considered as an option, the number of higher education courses available online is lower than those available in a face-to-face setting.

Poorer provision for non-metropolitan students is not only confined to university provision itself. Range of offerings at VCE level can also be a problem in rural and regional Victoria. A critical mass is required to run a subject at any one school, and where there are fewer students in a geographical area overall, necessarily there will be a smaller range of subjects to choose from at VCE level. Given VCE subjects are weighted as part of ENTER scores, this can impact on a rural/regional student’s ENTER score; and subsequently on their ability to gain a place at a higher education institution.

In the south west we also have an emerging problem. We are trying to increase our pool of skilled and semi-skill labour. We have had success through some inward migration programs. The children of these migrants require English language support (as do their families). However, due to the smaller numbers and disparate nature of the spread of these migrants, it is difficult to run and sustain funding for English language studies. The result is that these people miss out. This is actually creating a new group of disadvantaged young people. Without the English skills they have little or no change of participating in higher education. Again, these people are disadvantaged due to their geographic location. In a metropolitan setting they would have language services available.

**Transport & Travelling to Higher Education**

Undoubtedly access to transport to higher education institutions and the personal and social impact of traveling long distances are key considerations for young people in South West Victoria wishing to participate in higher education. This is particularly the case for those living in rural areas who wish to access higher education offerings that are available in their region.

One of our member's eldest sons travelled a 160km return trip to access higher education, though the personal and social impact of traveling these long distances took their toll, and he withdrew from the course after one year.

Public transport for many students is simply unavailable in rural areas. As one of our members notes “Travelling is only a reasonable option if the student can drive themselves”. And of course, this is not possible if a student is under eighteen, or their family is not in a financial position to have a car available for them.

**Relocation**

Relocating to access higher education has a number of effects on the student, his/her family and their community.
Along with the economic impacts of housing, and transport home for visits, there are also numerous social impacts of relocation.

Culture shock and social isolation were mentioned by a number of our members in relation to relocation. One member said “many students come from schools with a population of 250 – 300 and they find the social adjustment of going to a metropolitan university extremely daunting and overwhelming.”

Another member also noted “In my personal experience, relocation was dangerous to my personal safety. I could not afford to live in a safe area in Melbourne and it was a fair distance from public transport. The house that I and other Colac students rented had holes in the floor and was extremely gross to live in.”

Many students in the South West are reluctant to leave family and friends in their home communities; and indeed to leave the rural locale for an urban environment.

Communities left behind when a student does relocate lose not only sons, daughters and friends, but an individual who would have otherwise put back into their home community and helped to assure its ongoing sustainability.

**Aspirations**

There is a lack of an “education and learning culture” in the South West that discourages our young people to strive for higher education qualifications, especially in the face of other barriers that have already been discussed.

**CASE STUDY**

One of our members related the story of their own family to illustrate the point of lowered aspirations of local students. The parents from this family are well educated and both parents receive a good income. Indeed, whilst it is an issue for all families outside metropolitan Melbourne, they had never discussed the potential financial impact on their family of their children relocating to pursue higher education with their children. Despite this, their 11 year old son came home from school one day and announced at the dinner table that he did not want to go to university. On further probing from his parents, he finally revealed that he did not want to go because he thought it was too expensive and did not want to burden his family with this additional cost. He would be willing to “settle” for another option.

Many young people are assessing their own and their family’s position in a manner that takes into consideration all the financial, social, employment and geographic impacts when deciding to attend university – more often that not, we are now seeing an emergent trend to decline to go to university as the barriers are just too great.

One of the other issues impacting on the aspirations of students in the South West is the lack of affordable housing in metropolitan Melbourne. The media is currently full of stories about record low levels of rental accommodation and the very real prospects of homelessness being felt by many people in Melbourne, particularly the young and the very old. Messages such as these can be responsible for compounding lowering aspirations in the minds of our young people.

Tackling lowered aspirations by our young people is something that requires a long term commitment to changing as it is so embedded in our communities.
Centrelink

There is also concern that there are continual barriers for those eligible to access, and remain in receipt of, Centrelink benefits to their support participation in higher education. Increasingly, students are becoming more frustrated and disillusioned at an unorganised and unsupportive system that has clearly lost touch with the costs and commitment required to participate in higher education.

CASE STUDY

A SWLLEN Member relayed an experience of their partner who has recently returned to study in the south west. While the partner had had an extremely positive experience of returning to study in a rural setting, she was incredibly frustrated at the lack of understanding and support that had been shown by Centrelink during her time receiving an Austudy benefit.

The member’s partner felt restricted by a benefit that encouraged both her and her partner to limit their work hours (to lessen the adverse affect on payments) and deterred by poor communication on behalf of Centrelink to remain on Austudy. The partner had recently been cut off from Austudy as she exceeded the three and half year eligibility timeframe for the benefit. However, she was only notified of this fact two weeks prior to payments ceasing and was then informed that if she wanted to continue to receive benefits her only option was to apply for the Newstart Allowance and look for full time employment.

The member’s partner had a genuine reason for exceeding the Austudy eligibility timeframe due to her father passing away; however, this was not considered satisfactory by Centrelink for continued benefits. The ceasing of payments also affected the continuation of a scholarship that she was receiving, further compounding the financial hardship incurred.

While the member’s partner has the right to further appeal her status with Centrelink, she has decided that the benefits are not worth the time, energy and effort required to receive what amounts to a sum that doesn’t even begin to cover the costs associated with her course.

The amount of money a person can earn before having benefits reduced is also an issue if a student manages to qualify for income support to study. This amount has remained the same since 1991. The $6000 cut off point, if indexed at just 2% per annum would now (2008) be $8570.00. Instead the amount remains at the level it does ensuring that students qualifying for income support remain well below the poverty line. This position is exasperated for those who have no family and community network to provide extra support. These are the rural and regional young people who are choosing to remain at home rather than tackling barriers that are seen as insurmountable.
5) Advantages and disadvantages of participation and non-participation in higher education for school leavers and their families and communities in metropolitan, rural and regional areas.

As the Inquiry will be aware, there is significant research available that demonstrates the benefits to individuals and society of participation in higher education. For example, a study by Leigh and Ryan\(^{iii}\) indicates that extra years of schooling substantially increase lifetime earnings (except in the case of the bottom 25% of early school leavers as shown in a report by the Centre for Independent Studies\(^{iv}\)).

The following are comments from some of our members on what they see as the advantages of participation in higher education by students from their communities:

"Some community members may see it as a 'right of passage' for young people to leave home and move to the 'big' cities – i.e. it is part of growing up. Concern is raised around the number of young people who return to their communities after completing their studies. Because many young people leave their communities during this time - there are limited facilities / services for those young people who remain within the community. The community in turn tends to be more conservative - responding to the needs of older people and families."

"Better skilling students for future jobs, addressing current skill shortages, retention of employees in the local region, creating sustainable growth for the region's workforce. Non participation in higher education restricts job opportunities and earning capacities and increases dependency on government benefits, lower self esteem and value of worth, potentially social problems, drug and alcohol issues."

"The advantages in participating in higher education are well documented and of great benefit to the community and the individual. Higher long term income, better employment options, career path, greater employment opportunities and long term employment. Benefits for the community include maintaining professions in our community, vibrant social diversity in our community, and greater range of services in local community."

"Country kids being better educated can only benefit the community. Colac is a prime example of places where there is a demonstrated lower level of education i.e. year 10 being the maximum for most of the male population! Higher education for country kids can produce a culture of learning and supply skill shortages for country towns."

6) Potential effects of geographical differences in participation in higher education on skills shortages and the Victorian economy.

In 2003 the Local Government Economic Development Units within the region undertook a general survey with regional businesses to get a better understanding of skills shortages in the region. The results are summarised below.
Overview of regional skills shortages (2003)

Skills Shortages in the LCP regions

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<th>Professionals</th>
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<td>Teachers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Architects</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shearers</td>
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<tr>
<td>All trades- building and construction workers, plumbing, bricklayers, joiner, carpet layers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Metal trades and engineering- all areas</td>
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<tr>
<td>Medical and health professionals</td>
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<tr>
<td>Town planners and ancillary- engineering, surveying</td>
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<tr>
<td>Transport and Automotive- small and large engines- Warehousing and distribution.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Transport driver- heavy and light</td>
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<tr>
<td>Farm and agricultural workers- skill and semi-skilled, Welder</td>
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<tr>
<td>Skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled general labour- manufacturing processing workers and food processing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chef</td>
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While the above information is relatively general, when considered with other information and data including anecdotal industry evidence, the sectors within the region that are experiencing growth, the flow on effects of growth industries into service and support sectors, information from Economic Development.

As you can see in the table above, at least half of the categories listed are for professions requiring higher education qualifications. Indeed, one of our members commented “Skill shortages in trade related areas can be catered for locally (plumbing, building and construction and electrical) whereas professional areas like engineering, health services and teaching, require much further travel and lifestyle changes requiring significant financial support.”

7) Strategies to address any barriers contributing to geographic differences in participation in higher education.

The SWLLEN believes that current models for both supporting higher educational institutions and young people to attend them are very metro-centric; assuming no or low access issues in terms of transport and provision. The following recommendations aim to provide a platform for a more rural/regionally focused model that recognises and addresses the real barriers to young people from the South West participating in higher education at the same rate as their metropolitan counterparts.

**Recommendation One:** That the state government strongly lobbies federal government to drop means testing for Youth Allowance for all students from non-metropolitan areas attending higher education.

**Recommendation Two:** That the state government strongly lobby federal government to drop means testing for Rent Assistance for all students from non-metropolitan areas attending higher education.

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2 This information was taken from the SWLLEN Local Community Partnerships Strategic Plan, Updated 13 April 2008
**Recommendation Three:** That state government strongly lobby federal government to provide a health care card for all students from non-metropolitan areas attending higher education.

**Recommendation Four:** That state government provide all students from non-metropolitan areas attending higher education with a free transport student concession card.

**Recommendation Five:** That a greater investment be made in flexible and online provision of higher education that can be supported by at least some face to face interaction, and delivered in partnership by rural/regional and metropolitan providers.

*For example, currently William Angliss TAFE deliver hospitality courses for young people in partnership with a local ACE Provider in South West Victoria.*

**Recommendation Six:** That state government enter into a long term partnership with rural and regional LLEns to combat lowered aspirations of rural and regional students in relation to higher education participation.

**Recommendation Seven:** That state government support the development of more higher education campuses with an improved range of courses, and particularly in courses that address skill shortages in that area.

**Recommendation Eight:** That state government make a long term investment in public transport to education providers throughout rural and regional areas. This is required, regardless of minimum numbers of students.

**Recommendation Nine:** Funding models should provide for an additional loading to deliver courses in rural and regional areas, recognising the additional costs of delivering to a large geographic area with limited or no appropriate public transport in place.

**Recommendation Ten:** The South West regional office of the DEECD be located in the centre of the region, that is, in Warrnambool. There are 19 secondary schools in Geelong (including Lara) and 27 in the South West. Geelong is one hour from Centre office (Melbourne) but a school like Casterton is at least 4 hours away from any contact with the Department. De-centralising government support services, especially education and youth related services can benefit all other services in the longer term e.g. justice, Centrelink DHS, health and housing etc.

**Recommendation Eleven:** That provision at the secondary level be substantially broader in rural and regional Victoria- through a supported and fully funded plan by DEECD. Equal access (to that of metropolitan schools) at the secondary level to a full offer of courses and subjects therefore broadening available pathways to support an increase in uptake of University places.

**Recommendation Twelve:** Education policy is developed through a better method which accepts the rural disadvantages and creates positive discrimination to compensate for this when funding all programs and projects.
**Other strategies suggested by our members....**

“Colac specifically has been under the further education and training radar for far too long. It is important that significant TAFE providers in partnership with ACE providers are supported to establish a physical presence backed by an engagement strategy in the community to relate to local training needs - which is also filtered through the schools.”

“Even if we increased what’s in offer today by 100% we would still have to have a great amount of lead in time to change the aspirations of the current cohort of young people and their families. We need a concerted, systemic approach to dealing with perceptions and needs in relation to higher education”

“Online is a good idea so long as there is a physical presence and place to support students - the developing Global Connector as part of the new Colac Secondary College will be good but it needs more resource support.”

“….Needs a way of making further education and training a real possibility for our young people AND their families. Needs individual problem solving and support to work with students and families. Needs a pathways follow up through the tertiary providers to make sure that students are looked after and followed up - not just left to their own devices to sink or swim. Perhaps the SWLLEN might put together a package for kids away from home to help them stay on track and to complete their courses.” (note- this could be done in conjunction with LGA’s)

“As both a current university student, RTO manager and parent of a year 11 student, financial support for transport and living out of home costs are the more appropriate. Whilst more funded accredited training hours would benefit the Colac region, young people still want to move away for the experience of living out of Colac.”

“You would definitely need to improve online provision facilities, financial and transport support and mentoring programs for students.”

“Access to living away from home and financial support if you have to relocate for study (not means tested)….three levels of government support for regional university campuses to ensure viability.”

**Finally.....** It is the opinion of South West Local Learning and Employment Network that, although appreciated, this Parliamentary Inquiry could follow the many, similar Inquiries that look at these issues of inequity. We implore members to see this valuable process through to its end. Addressing the issues raised will require **ACTION** and substantial **CHANGE** as we are talking about grave inequities that if left unaddressed have long term consequences for individuals, families, communities and Australia’s economy and future.

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i  Tsolidis G Elite Government Schools: Facilitating Imagined Futures University of Ballarat 2008
ii  Dryden P An Analysis of Deferment of University Places by South West Victorian Students SWLLEN 2005
iii  Australian Scholarships Group: One Line Cost Calculator
iv  Norton A