18 March 2008

Ms Karen Ellingford
Executive Officer
Education and Training Committee
Parliament House
Spring Street
East Melbourne VIC 3002

etc@parliament.vic.gov.au

Dear Ms Ellingford,

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

Thank you for your letter dated 23 January, 2008 to our Vice-Chancellor inviting the University of Melbourne to make a submission in relation the Parliamentary Inquiry into Geographical Differences in the Rate in which Victorian Students Participate in Higher Education.

Please find attached a submission on behalf of the University of Melbourne.

Should you require additional information relating to our submission, please contact Michael Beaton-Wells, Deputy Principal, University Planning, ph (03) 8344 4597 or email: m.beaton-wells@unimelb.edu.au.

I apologise for the delay in forwarding. I trust the submission will still be able to be accepted.

Yours sincerely,

Ian Marshman
Senior Vice-Principal
Submission to:
Parliamentary Inquiry into geographical differences in the rate in which Victorian students participate in higher education

Introduction

The University of Melbourne welcomes the opportunity to contribute information to the Parliamentary Inquiry into geographical differences in the rate in which Victorian students participate in higher education.

The University aspires to attract the best and brightest students from around the world including those from educationally, financially, socially or geographically disadvantaged backgrounds. This submission presents geographical data on University enrolments. It outlines some of the key initiatives the University has introduced to promote access for students from diverse backgrounds. It discusses barriers for rural and isolated students attending university, including lack of affordable housing. Finally it describes some characteristics of rural students and features that distinguish them from other undergraduate students whilst highlighting some of the key challenges identified by the University in assisting students from specific geographical locations remain at university and complete their studies.

Enrolment data

Over the last five years, the University of Melbourne has had a reasonably stable student profile in terms of the source region of commencing undergraduate students. Rural Victoria has accounted for approximately one in six students (ranging from 18% in 2003 down to 15% in 2007). Outer metropolitan Melbourne has accounted for between 13-14% over this period, inner metropolitan Melbourne 47-49% and interstate 6-7%.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Undergraduate Commencing Students</th>
<th>Percentages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interstate</td>
<td>341</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melbourne - Central</td>
<td>504</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melbourne - East inner</td>
<td>1056</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melbourne - East Outer</td>
<td>503</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melbourne - North Inner</td>
<td>561</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melbourne - North Outer</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melbourne - South East</td>
<td>935</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melbourne - South West</td>
<td>467</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melbourne - West Inner</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melbourne - West Outer</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural - East</td>
<td>307</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural - North</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural - North East</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural - Prefabura</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural - South East</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural - South West</td>
<td>258</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural - West</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grand Total</td>
<td>5655</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
It should be noted that the decline in rural participation rates is largely due to the decline in demand for agriculture and related disciplines throughout the university sector.

University of Melbourne Access Initiatives for Rural Students

Melbourne Access Program
The University of Melbourne is committed to significantly increasing the number of students from educationally, financially or socially disadvantaged backgrounds enrolling in undergraduate programs. Access Melbourne is a combined special entry and access scholarships scheme designed to increase participation of students from diverse backgrounds.

One thousand of the University’s new undergraduate Commonwealth supported places will be offered to students who have applied through Access Melbourne. In addition, many of these students will be awarded a Melbourne Access Scholarship.

Access Melbourne enhances opportunities for selection into a course as it provides prospective students with the opportunity to outline the ongoing circumstances that have affected their chance of gaining a place at the University of Melbourne.

There are a range of application categories, including recognition as an Indigenous Australian, difficult family circumstances, disadvantaged socio-economic background, disability or long term medical condition non-English speaking background, under-represented school, and rural or isolated. In relation to the last, students are eligible to apply if they will be required to move from a location not defined as a major city in order to undertake their chosen course at the University of Melbourne; and if they are a non-school leaver, have lived in the rural or regional area for three of the last four years; or, if they are a school-leaver, have completed the final two years of schooling in a rural or regional secondary school.

The University uses the Australian Standard Geographic Classification (ASGC) Remoteness Areas classification produced by the Australian Bureau of Statistics. All postcodes other than those defined as a ‘Major City of Australia’ are eligible for this category. School-leaver applicants must meet this classification for both home and school location.

It should be noted that there are often multiple access criteria for rural students who may for example simultaneously be also from a disadvantaged socio-economic background or an under-represented school

Kwong Lee Dow Young Scholars Program
The Kwong Lee Dow Young Scholars Program is an academic enrichment program designed to support high-achieving Victorian secondary school students. The program offers numerous opportunities for students to interact with the University and each other, with substantial benefits for students who subsequently enrol at the University of Melbourne.
Principals of every Victorian secondary school have been invited to nominate up to five outstanding Year 10 students going in to Year 11 in 2008, and up to five high-achieving Year 11 students commencing Year 12 in 2008.

The University of Melbourne will select at least one student from each school in each of the two year levels to participate in the Kwong Lee Dow Young Scholars Program. Up to 700 Year 10 students who will commence Year 11 in 2008 and up to 700 Year 11 students who will commence Year 12 in 2008 will be selected.

Participants will be selected on the basis of academic performance and leadership skills. The University particularly encourages nomination of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

**Barriers to Entry**

*Community Attitudes*
The Centre for the Study of Higher Education (CSHE) at the University of Melbourne has examined the ways in which geographical location and socioeconomic background influence young people’s decisions about the possibility of going to university (James, 2000).

The CSHE study revealed differences in the attitudes of school student subgroups towards the relevance and attainability of higher education on: affordability, relevance of university qualifications to the jobs they want, and perceptions of their parents’ wishes. Rural students on average were significantly less likely to believe that a university course would offer them the chance of an interesting and rewarding career, that their parents want them to do a university course, and that their families could afford the costs of supporting them at university.

Imbalances in higher education participation reflect differences in family and community attitudes towards the relevance of education. The effects of these social influences are apparent well before the final year of secondary education. For rural students in communities where education is not seen as relevant to life and employment, going to university is not the norm. Many rural students lack familiarity with the culture of universities found among urban students. So “participation inequities can only be addressed by focusing more energy on the early stages of the creation of educational ambition,” (James, 2000, p.111). In short, there needs to be changes to perceptions of the relevance and benefits of education in rural communities. The responsibility for this task is unclear. From the University perspective, universities can contribute by non institutional specific initiatives and collaborative effort to promote the values of education, values which after all are germane to universities.

*Affordable Housing*
There is a current crisis in the private rental market in Melbourne that has serious implications for students and universities, especially students from rural areas.

In the past two years the vacancy rate in the private rental market in Melbourne has dropped dramatically. This has had a significant impact on the availability and affordability of housing for student renters. It is estimated that thirty five per cent of the
population of the City of Melbourne are full-time students. In a survey of 8424 students at the University of Melbourne in 2007, nearly half (49.3%) of undergraduates reported living with their parent or guardian, whilst 17.7% were renting privately, 11.2% were in a share house, 8.4% in a residential hall or college, 6.8% in a student apartment complex, with 6.6% in miscellaneous other arrangements.

According to figures from the Real Estate Institute of Victoria (REIV), in August 2007 the inner region (within four km of the Melbourne CBD) had a vacancy rate of 0.8 percent. Three percent is considered to be a market in balance. The impact of this situation has been extreme competition for the limited number of vacancies in the market and a consequent rapid rise in rental prices as demand for properties well outstrips supply. It is estimated that rental costs will increase by 10 – 12% in 2008, at a time when overall costs of living are also increasing.

Short supply in the private rental market in 2007 forced many students into the remaining vacancies in large student housing complexes, including Residential Colleges. This is despite the fact that these options are typically more expensive than comparable options in the private residential market, as well as being rare and at a fixed base that cannot expand.

By the end of January 2008, virtually all major student housing providers in Melbourne were fully occupied and committed for the coming year. A month before the semester commences most had lengthy waiting lists, a situation that is perhaps unprecedented in Melbourne. The retention of tenants in these facilities from 2007 to 2008 has been extremely high due to the lack of available alternatives, complicating the release of further properties onto the market.

This housing crisis impacts on students by:
- Compromising their ability to focus on their academic goals;
- Requiring them to work excessive hours in paid employment to afford rent;
- Exposing them to living in overcrowded and sometimes unsafe or untenable situations.
• Requiring them to live further from the University with subsequent increases in travel times and increasing the likelihood of student assaults as a result of late night travel on unsupervised transport networks;
• Dislocating them from established or preferred networks and reducing the capacity to develop cohorts and supportive friendship networks;
• Exposing them to possible exploitation by unscrupulous landlords, and
• Increasing the instance of students experiencing some form of homelessness.

There are some consequential impacts of the housing crisis on rural students. Students moving to urban centres to study do not have the option of a long commute in the event they are unable to find suitable housing. The pressure to find accommodation in such a tight market may force some into committing to rent sight-unseen. In addition, a lack of familiarity with the Melbourne market can make the already challenging task of finding rental accommodation more onerous and overwhelming.

Responses to the housing crisis which have been introduced or considered by the University of Melbourne include the following:
• The University’s Student Housing Service (SHS) aims to ensure that incoming students are informed as early as possible about strategies that increase their likelihood of securing a suitable housing option, including referral to relevant resources and University programs. On Academic Advice Day on 21st January 2008, SHS coordinated the inaugural Housing Expo as an initiative to further this objective.
• Other SHS short-term initiatives have included trying to increase the number of vacancies listed on the online AccomNet advertisement service, by contacting other prospective advertisers to ensure they are familiar with the free advertising service. Utilising other media to identify new advertisers is also being considered.
• The University may explore the feasibility and value of increasing the number of Housing Grants offered by Financial Aid to assist students on low incomes. Inevitably this would mean a redirection of funding away from core learning and teaching activities.
• It may further, in collaboration with the Residential Colleges, encourage review of College selection procedures with the intent of giving non-Melbourne based students higher selection priority and ensure student applicants are informed in a timely manner of their application’s success or failure. This intention is to avoid applicants experiencing a protracted waiting period whereby they become more vulnerable to a highly competitive housing market.

In the longer term however, it is the view of the University that federal and state governments have a responsibility to ensure equity in the provision of student housing by developing strategic plans to reduce students’ vulnerability to cyclical shifts in supply and demand in the private market. Though there is a shortage of all types of housing at present, the constant (and increasing) gap is affordable housing. The University is keen to work in partnership and cooperation with government to find solutions to student housing needs and ensure that students from regional Victoria are appropriately identified as an equity group in relevant forums.

It also needs to be recognised that in Melbourne the education economy involves a strong working relationship between universities and private providers of student
housing where each is well informed of the other’s needs and priorities within their sectors.

The University would welcome opportunities to work more collaboratively with private operators of student housing to ensure that students living in them are better integrated into the University community, and actively to foster and seek out initiatives that will deliver affordable housing to students

Other Challenges faced by students from specific geographical locations

Rural Students
It is the experience of service providers at the University that, having commenced, rural students face a combination of further challenges which impact on their capacity to engage and remain in, then complete, studies.

Data collected at the University of Melbourne Counselling Service show that student clients who identify as coming from a rural and remote area, in comparison to the overall sample of students attending for counselling, are younger, have more sessions of counselling, are more likely to present with psychological issues (anxiety or depression), and more likely to have obtained information about the availability of counselling through independent means rather than from University staff.

Principal among the challenges facing rural students are the greater likelihood of social isolation and lack of social connections. Metropolitan students often attend university with peers from their high school; international students, although isolated, often make associations with others from their country of origin whilst in Australia. For rural students however, there is often no natural or easily identifiable cohort to join, other than the overall student or discipline cohort.

Rural students also face a major transition in the adjustment not just to an unfamiliar physical environment but to a different form of community – from a rural community to a large, populous conurbation. The city and the urban university itself can seem like a different world, and rural students navigate this cultural adjustment with different degrees of comfort and success. They also face a transition in living away from home for the first time, and managing their affairs including budgeting.

The above factors come into play especially when, for whatever reasons, a student from a rural area begins to struggle either personally or academically or both. Some will respond to their isolation by returning back home as often as they can. Whilst this is an understandable coping strategy, it can hinder engagement and prolong the process of adjustment. In addition, if they have not been able to engage strongly in the community of the University, when problems arise they are more likely to withdraw into themselves, go home, and cease to attend university, rather than “turning to the university” for assistance and support. Overall dislocation is also exacerbated in circumstances where the student is from a family where no one else has previously been to University (although the impact of this factor is not limited to rural students).

Other issues rural students may face include:
• Travel costs to and from home;
• Exposure to financial difficulties in the rural economy that impact on their family circumstances, including recession brought on by drought;
• For some, the necessity to work at home during semester to assist family businesses.

Outer Suburban Students
Students commuting to university for over ninety minutes per day face a series of challenges in engaging in university and pursuing academic success. Contemporary students often spend a significant number of hours in paid employment in order to meet their financial needs. This takes up already a major proportion of their available time. When a substantial amount of time per day is spent in travel as well, then there is little time left both for study and for participation in the broader social, cultural and intellectual life of the university. Studying whilst commuting is not always possible – for example if driving, or if travelling on overcrowded public transport at peak periods.

Many extra curricular cultural, intellectual, social and recreational activities offered by the university occur out of hours – for example in the early evenings. It is simply more difficult for outer suburban students to participate in these, and hence in a broader engagement in university life.

In addition, not unlike rural students, there can be a cultural adjustment to the world of the university that is more accentuated than that experienced by students coming to university from inner suburban locations.

Initiatives to support students to remain at University and complete studies

The University is aware of a series of interventions that can mitigate against the challenges faced by rural and outer-suburban students.

These include
• Early intervention. The University is moving to employ a student enrolment questionnaire which can identify factors that may make a student be more likely to be at academic risk – such as excessive anticipated travel time to university, or coming from a small rural community. Such students can be flagged and targeted for active support and assistance, especially in the critical early period of their time at the university.
• Programs promoting social interaction. The clubs and societies of the University play a critical role here. The University also has a substantial transition and orientation program to assist all students with the adjustment to university life. In addition, the curriculum design of the new University of Melbourne undergraduate degrees specifically focus on promoting student engagement, interaction and group participation. It is anticipated this will have a significant positive impact on level and quality of student engagement overall, especially as these are activities that occur during the normal course of the academic day (as opposed to evening events). The current Federal Government review of the impact of VSU legislation is relevant and important here as the loss of funding for student organisations as a result of VSU has affected the range of on-campus activity.
The promotion of time management skills. Again using the example of an outer-suburban student, who studies, travels and has paid employment, maximising the effective use of time is critical.

In relation to the above, the University's Counselling Service currently offers free workshop programs on social confidence and time management, and in addition has a workshop specifically targeting students identified as at risk in the first semester of first year.

**After Graduation**

The University has analysed the relationship between home location (three months after graduation) and graduate outcomes as reported in the Australian Graduate Survey. This analysis shows no significant relationship. It should be noted that these cohorts are not the same as those described above in terms of commencing students to the University. We have not conducted a longitudinal study based on initial regional groups and followed these groups across time at University and beyond.

**Reference**