SUBMISSION

Parliament of Victoria
Education and Training Committee

Inquiry into Geographical Differences in the rate in which Victorian Students Participate in Higher Education

March 2008
• Advantages, disadvantages and relevance of university education for individuals, families and the community as a whole

- Advantages

It is imperative that regional communities such as the Central Highlands of Victoria retain a strong quota of tertiary educated and qualified people throughout the workforce and the wider community. This provides the knowledge and understanding required to ensure these communities can deliver quality products and services, provide appropriate community amenity and develop the leadership and vision demanded within any modern society. It also ensures the evolution of a community with greater diversity of opportunity, not simply in the nature of economic and business activity, but in the social and cultural environment.

Large firms in rural areas attract huge numbers of applications for jobs because of the generous pay and conditions. Multi-national companies in the regions have pay scales for professional roles based more on relativity within the company than the local market. Therefore the pay and conditions for professional roles generally exceeds the local market by a large amount. This is a huge incentive for local, aspiring applicants. The first cut of applicants generally is on education such that degree qualified people remain in the pool and those not degree qualified are automatically excluded. This may also extend to roles not normally regarded as professions where management skills are required (eg Shift managers). So university education opens up a greater scope for job success and progression.

It is therefore, essential, that people from within regional communities have ready access to tertiary education opportunities and that these communities can develop in a way which will attract people with relevant tertiary education qualifications.

Regional communities need doctors; regional communities need scientists; regional communities need architects – they need access to the full range of people with tertiary qualifications. They will stand a much stronger chance of securing those people if the reality of a tertiary education is maintained prominently within the community; that it is regarded as desirable and seen as accessible.

The view of vicCHACC is that, as a result, the strength of families will grow, the strength of individuals within families and workplaces will grow and the strength of the community will be enhanced.

These outcomes are essential in regional communities and attention to them is far more important and necessary for these communities than it is in the larger urban communities with a range of tertiary options and much greater lifestyle and economic diversity.
For this reason vicCHACC included consideration of this in one of its regular State of the Region forums in 2007 when the matter was addressed by Vice Chancellor of the University of Ballarat, Prof David Battersby. Some detail from this presentation will be included elsewhere in this submission.

- **Disadvantages**

The appreciation and availability of a university education within a regional community is generally a distinct advantage – a necessity in fact. Where there is a disadvantage is that this appreciation and availability very often takes people away from regional communities. They leave seeking greater opportunity to express the talents and knowledge gained through university education or they leave to gain the university education they seek – often never to return. Figures provided by University of Ballarat Vice Chancellor Prof David Battersby to a vicCHACC forum included that 77% of 18 year-olds from regional Victoria who go to university in Melbourne do not return. While this is a strong case for providing as much opportunity as possible for access to tertiary education within regions, it also confirms the disadvantage that, when young people seek a tertiary education – an outcome to be encouraged in regional places – but go away to seek it, they are often lost to their communities. **The vicCHACC is convinced the advantages of university education for individuals, families and communities across the Central Highlands of Victoria, despite this, far outweigh the disadvantages.**

- **Relevance**

University education is utterly relevant to the Central Highlands of Victoria.

*In the words of Prof David Battersby to the vicCentral Highlands ACC State of the Regions forum:*

```
`Productivity is the measure of how efficiently we produce goods and services. The better trained we are the greater our productivity``”.

The Central Highlands is a community with great challenges. In the Moorabool Shire, bordering on Melbourne, there is the swelling peri-urban environment mixed with the existing agricultural sector. In Ballarat there is a fast growing population with the demands for decisions now about infrastructure and services which will impact for years ahead. In the Pyrenees Shire there are the challenges of the growth of alternative energy options, management of extensive shire infrastructure on a low rate base and the provision of community amenities within a dispersed population in sometimes isolated settlements and communities. In Hepburn there is the growth of the tree-change population from the
metropolitan area together with a range of other demands in common with the neighbouring councils already mentioned. These are modern, vibrant communities. They have much in common. They represent a total community of around 150,000 which is as entitled to the very best economic, social and cultural opportunities available. Essential to ensuring the delivery of those opportunities is the availability of university education for its citizens. It is not the total requirement, but it is an essential element.

University education is imperative if regional communities such as Victoria’s Central Highlands are to move forward with confidence; to provide the appropriate fabric of living for its citizens and those who would choose to settle here.

- The advantages and disadvantages of non-participation in university education, including participation in alternative post-school pathways such as TAFE and apprenticeships

  - Advantages

  A variety of educational outcomes for people in regional communities is the ideal. The flavour of the month seems to be skills. There certainly appears to be a dearth of trades people in our growing economy right now, but is there, or should there be, a connection between participation in university and non-participation in trade training? It is not a nil-sum game. Something else is at play in the lack of apprenticeships or students following the TAFE route. University participation does not appear to be in decline, despite increasing costs and burdens on families, however the same cannot be said of trade education. Therefore the challenge must be to attract people back to these streams if we are to address the skills shortage in trades. These are important skills for the development of infrastructure to support the growth of rural and regional towns. It is, therefore, advantageous that some people do not participate in university education, provided there are constructive and relevant other pathways for them to follow. It is essential that regional communities constantly assess the skills and knowledge they require in their workforce to deliver the best economic outcomes. It is then necessary to attempt to provide the education streams which will best serve that community. There will be those in the community who do not wish to attend university. The advantage from this comes when they are directed to other streams which provide quality outcomes relevant to the needs of local industry.

  The advantage for a regional community from non-participation in university education will only come when those people can be
directed to other relevant streams of education and those streams are locally available.

- **Disadvantage**

The disadvantage for regional communities like the Central Highlands of Victoria of non-participation in university education cannot be understated. Regional communities need the depth of thought, the local research skills, the analytical knowledge which comes from the existence within of university educated citizens. It is not all it needs, but it is an essential element of any fully-rounded community. Non-participation in university education also suggests a lack of endeavour by a community and its citizens; it suggests a go nowhere, achieve nothing mentality. *This is not the mentality of the Central Highlands of Victoria. It is essential for this region that opportunities at university level are built upon and maintained both for the individual and community benefit. These opportunities must also be developed to complement and enhance all other streams of education and not designed in isolation.*

A holistic educational approach of this kind will help to address any disparity in university education between this region and the metropolitan area by ensuring its relevance is clear and unambiguous.

- **Barriers that prevent or discourage local students from attending and completing university**

A simple but accurate observation contained in the discussion paper, *It’s Crunch Time, Raising Youth Engagement and Attainment*, prepared by Australian Industry Group and Dusseldorf Skills Forum addresses the above issue.

*It states: Youth engagement in learning and work is stratified by:*

- **Geography** – young people in the capital cities are more likely to be working or learning full-time;
- **Household and socio-economic status** – young people in households with a weekly income below $350 are far less likely to be in full-time learning or work;
- **Educational attainment** – Early school leavers are more likely not to be in full time work or learning.

The following addresses these issues in the context of young people from regional Victoria.
Cost

There is little doubt that the cost of university education prohibits young people from regional communities, more than from metropolitan communities, taking the tertiary option. It is perhaps less certain, but probably likely, that some mature age potential university students in the regions decline the option also because of cost.

The following observations are taken from a Victorian Department of Planning and Community Development assessment of 2006 census data. 
`Outside Melbourne, median incomes tend to be lower than the state average...”
`More isolated regional areas and those more reliant on agriculture generally have below average incomes.”

This suggests that many regional communities – particularly those smaller and more isolated places – and their citizens have lower socio-economic levels than city locations. People from those communities would logically find it less financially attractive to attend university. Not only are they confronted by the course fees etc, they may require regular transport and away-from-home accommodation.

In the words of the now Deputy Prime Minister and Federal Minister for Education, Julia Gillard, in her maiden speech to parliament: `...we have returned to a system of privilege rather than merit in our universities, a system of allowing the rich to buy a place while those with better entrance marks but not enough money miss out...”.

And further, `My predecessor, Barry Jones, used to say that unfortunately postcodes are probably the strongest factor in determining a person's expectations of success in life. It will be one of my priorities in politics to ensure that in the Australia of the future the famous quizmaster is, for once, wrong.”

An Australian Government Department of Education and Training study into the Factors Impacting on Student Aspirations and Expectations in Regional Australia (2004) found:
`When students were asked what might hinder their pursuit of their aspirations, they, like their parents, spoke compellingly about the financial resources that would be necessary to support them, and that might yet obstruct them. Some saw the prospect as absolutely daunting.....”

The challenge of cost is not likely to get any better either.
A report in The Australian (January 23, 2008) began:  
``University fees for students are set to skyrocket and could top $26,000 a year in the next three decades, putting an even greater hole in the back pocket of families trying to educate their children.”

- **ENTER score**

The whole ENTER score process may also hinder participation. Passion for low scoring subjects is completely discounted in this system making it harder for students to pursue their chosen vocation because they do not attain a prescribed score despite being excellent students and more importantly having drive and passion for their vocation.

- **Separation**

This submission earlier commented on the percentage of regional students who leave to attend university and do not return. There is also a scenario where other young people from regional communities are reluctant to leave home to attend university.

The Australian Department of Education, Science and Training Study on Factors Impacting on Student Aspirations and Expectations in Regional Australia (2004) found:
``While financial considerations dominated student responses, some also spoke about matters of the heart, of what it would mean to them to leave their homes, their families and their communities. Sometimes this sense of loss was accompanied by a sense of fear and of apprehension in taking up their lives in unfamiliar circumstances, in untried locations.”
``

They don’t want to leave home and, instead, take up local employment or further study at local institutions. This is a double whammy for these regional communities. Those young people who stay are not university educated and those who leave to study generally do not return. This presents the challenge of constantly seeking qualified people from outside to fill vacancies in professional positions – quite often without sufficient success.

- **Familiarity**

University education, its implications and impact, are generally much less familiar in smaller and isolated regional communities than they are in metropolitan areas, where they may even be taken for granted.

Again, the Australian Government report, Factors Impacting on Student Aspirations and Expectations in Regional Australia (2004) found:
Teachers and parents often added to the list of obstacles by claiming that a lack of occupational models in rural communities meant that students had fewer images from which to draw in envisioning what they might become. Equally salient was the lack of educational opportunities that rural students faced compared with their metropolitan counterparts. For example, some teachers expressed concern at the lack of specialist tuition and public examination preparation that was available to rural, compared with metropolitan, students. Availability of resources – financial, personal, occupational, educational, semiotic even – seemed to be the key to understanding the obstacles that students faced in actualising their aspirations and expectations for their futures.”

This has the potential to make it less likely that the same percentage of young people in regional areas will seek a university education than that of their counterparts in the city. For instance, only 14% of the Mallee’s 18 year-old males are going on to university...in contrast nearly 44% of 18 year-old males in metropolitan Melbourne enrolled at university last year. (Weekly Times 2007).

- Gender

Research has shown that there are far fewer males from regional areas seeking a university education than females.

``...more boys than girls become early school leavers and find work in their local communities. The common belief that rural communities symbolise male spaces – a belief held by boys and by girls in the focus groups – may ultimately explain why more rural girls than rural boys see their futures inscribed in tertiary studies – oftentimes outside of the communities – and more rural boys than rural girls see the inscriptions of their futures in local offerings of trades and apprenticeships.” (Australian Government study – Factors Impacting on Student Aspirations and Expectations in Regional Australia – 2004).

- Possible strategies to enable more young people from Victoria’s Central Highlands to participate in university education

- Better education and training infrastructure provision in regional areas
- Improve transport and access to universities
- Develop schemes to attract more young males from regional places to seek a university education
- Schemes that encourage a fair share of best quality teachers and mentors to regional and isolated schools and businesses to ensure a high level pre-university education
- Provide pay and conditions which attract high quality candidates to teaching and ensure a fair share of the best teachers are posted to regional locations
- Encourage growth in services and industries in regional communities which can demonstrate the application of skills and knowledge gained through a university education
- Provide programmes in secondary schools that can give an insight and develop a passion in students to want to follow a professional path
- Develop high quality work experience and mentoring programmes in progressive industries and in progressive companies in the regions
- Improve internet access to enable more extensive on-line study
- Review financial assistance packages to ensure they offer the greatest opportunity for regional students
- Promote throughout regional communities the courses with the most relevant application for local young people
- Further develop some course structures in regional and metropolitan universities of particular application to regional economic and community needs
- Provide the university education locally wherever possible.

While all of the above may be applied to a greater or lesser extent in regional Victoria, a report for the National Board of Employment, Education and Training’s Higher Education Council titled Rural and Isolated School Students and their Higher Education Choices argues that it should be understood that many rural students simply did not want to continue to higher education:

``The challenge for those working with rural and isolated students, therefore, is ensuring that whatever choices those young people make about their future, they can do so with their eyes wide open to the full range of possibilities. But in saying that, it is also important to say that such strategies of information and persuasion are applied non-judgmentally by those seeking to influence young people’s personal choices.”

- **Localised skill shortages that may be linked to the availability or otherwise of local education and training opportunities**

The advice to vicCHACC is that it is difficult to directly relate skills shortages in particular workplaces or industries to specific training inadequacies. But there are two points which it believes should be considered by the Committee.

1. It is essential that qualified teachers are available in greater numbers to regional training institutions and industries with on site training. The vicCHACC was advised that there have been instances where relevant skills were being sought by industry, there was a pool of local people
with the potential to take advantage of these vacancies, but there were insufficient teachers to generate the required flow of talented people. This suggests that retraining trades people at a local level and in regional locations to become trainers in their areas of expertise is an important consideration for this Committee. It also inclines the vicCHACC to the view that if there are training gaps which are exposing gaps in the industry or professional sectors, teaching and skills in industry training may be the best example.

2. Various training grants are available to attract young unemployed people in the regions into education at various levels. The vicCHACC is urged, through this application, to appeal to the Committee to consider where these can be extended to employed people prepared to retrain to fit skills gaps which appear. For instance, someone may be working in a skill area where there is, perhaps, an oversupply. If that person is prepared to retrain – or to train as a trainer – then if there is the capacity to improve the funding grant options for that person this should be considered.

There are skills shortages in various industries and business sectors through the Central Highlands. However, to the extent that they are capable, education and training institutions, together with the businesses and industries themselves, are working to deliver the training required. Attention to the above two points may greatly assist in those endeavours.


Peter Dwyer
Executive Officer
vicCentral Highlands Area Consultative Committee