Mr Geoff Howard  
Chair  
Education and Training Committee  
Parliament house  
Spring Street  
East Melbourne  3002

Dear Mr Howard,

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the effect of geographical differences in the rate in which Victorian students participate in higher education.

In preparing our submission VASSP elicited responses from school communities across Victoria to the Committee’s terms of reference. Our submission contains comments on each criteria based on that feedback and contains actual excerpts from school community responses (these are in italics). As you will see from the responses, geographical differences do have a significant impact on the student take up of higher educational opportunities. As we have done in past submissions, actual excerpts are provided so that your Committee has the opportunity to hear directly the voices of Victorian Principals and school communities on each of the terms of reference.

At the conclusion of the submission a number of VASSP recommendations are provided for your Committee’s consideration.

Yours sincerely

Brian Burgess  
President  
Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals
Geographical Differences in the Rate in which Victorian Students Participate in Higher Education.

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

The most significant driver of student choice in rural and metropolitan Victoria is cost. For a student in most rural and regional towns to accept any university offer, they must leave home. The cost of accommodation is substantial, whether it is University residences or rental properties.

Students and parents have to make careful decisions about where a student can apply to, and if they are able to take up any offers. Often country students will defer for 12 months in order to work to try to earn independent status with Centrelink and therefore be slightly better assisted. However, the reality is that most families still need to assist them in providing for living expenses – or the student has to find part-time work and this has the potential to impact negatively on their success at uni. Cost issues as well as location also affect the choices of students from Melbourne.

Students from lower socio-economic groups often lack the confidence to venture far from their familiar surroundings.

Good anecdotal evidence says that country students are finding it increasingly difficult to access metropolitan universities and distance to any other universities or tertiary providers generally is prohibitive from South Gippsland. Costs are certainly prohibitive and when the additional costs of housing, travel and associated living expenses are included the whole issue of tertiary studies is overwhelming for many country families; and this stress increases exponentially when families have no experience with tertiary training experience. The pre-HECS experience at least allowed many students to risk enrolment and leaving home because at least there was some possibility of surviving on a supported study allowance. Currently many students are only able to access tertiary study by deferring for 15 months and working so they can claim independent status and then applying for Study Allowance.

As a school in a small town in North Eastern Victoria, the key factors for students seeking further education are geographic, social and financial. Local TAFE options and uni options (Charles Sturt and La Trobe) are popular as is Melbourne. However an increasing number gaining offers in Melbourne defer

In Sunraysia, some 40% of students in Year 12 apply via VTAC, 40-65% take up offers in first year with a high % taking courses in Mildura, the rest defer for 1 year but a reasonable portion never take up a place. The main reason is the cost of travel to and from study in Melbourne and then the cost of living when in Melbourne.

The issues for Melbourne schools are similar, especially in lower socio-economic areas

Cost is a factor in our students applying for tertiary courses. Many of them need to work to support themselves when they leave school and want to work several hours per week to support themselves and their families.

They don't venture far from the local area. They are willing to look at Chisholm TAFE because it is local. Monash University may appeal by location but they may not get into Monash. They will not travel to Bundoora and are reluctant to travel to Deakin.
A key factor in students’ decisions at this school are location, location, location! Cultural and class factors are behind the fact that students apply chiefly to Monash and Holmesglen where they know students attending and can access by public transport.

The areas they are familiar with, their confidence in the use of public transport, their parents’ work locations all impact on their preparedness to apply widely. The socio-economic circumstances also impact hugely. Some students simply saw the cost as well beyond their means and were not prepared to carry a debt.

- **Influences of school retention rates, including enrolments and completions for VCE, VCAL and VETis in schools on participation in higher education.**

There is clear evidence that school retention has a positive influence on participation in higher education. However the pathway, VCE or VCAL, does influence whether students complete year 12 at a secondary school. Many VCAL students will move on to an apprenticeship or traineeship rather than complete the certificate. Therefore “destination” would seem a better measure of success than retention at this level. Schools with very successful programs in terms of destinations for students are often judged as underperforming in terms of university places and ENTER scores. This clearly undervalues their achievements.

A major issue that impacts is the cost of VETiS for schools and families. This tends to limit provision to low cost areas which then fail to engage students or address areas of skill shortage.

Retention at lower levels is heavily influenced by the provision of a broad suite of programs including VCAL and VETiS. There is a strong argument for extending a VCAL type course to Year 10 students and even a community based version at Year 9.

*Nearly all our VCE students apply for a tertiary place. We have a high retention of VCE students between Years 11 and 12. VCAL students have the aim of getting full-time work. This is usually more of a priority than completing a VCAL Certificate and one that should be the primary aim of such a course.*

**VET/TAFE:**
- Provision tends to be for traditional “male” trades, therefore limited access for girls;
- VET programs are good for retaining Yr. 10 “non-academic” boys;
- It would be better if we could access a wider variety of courses including online options with workshops throughout the year;
- Generally only lower level Certificates are available locally, along with and a few diplomas;
- There are plenty of short courses locally, but the range at the local TAFE campus is limited due to size and facilities;

**Australian Technical College:**
- At present, has only replicated what was already in the area – but they do offer higher Certificate levels;
- In fact, ATC students from our school are travelling 100kms each way when suitable facilities are in Portland at the local TAFE;

VCAL and VETiS has had a positive influence on the retention of students in year 11. Students see these programs as a transition from school to apprenticeships. These programs also give students a chance to try a trade before making a final decision on their career path. We
introduced a Vocational Technology Program 15 years ago to provide a course that would be relevant to their needs and reduce the temptation to leave school early. This program has been very successful in achieving these goals and is highly accepted by business.

VCAL and VET are still limited by COST and access to work placements. The country experience limits both these options to small numbers of students. The experience of my school is that since we are in deficit every measure is being taken to recoup the supposed deficit. Priorities according to Admin agendas which mean that there is very limited funding for everything and competition for that funding is fierce. Programs offered are reliant on teacher goodwill. Expectations and requirements for delivery are very high while at the same time teacher training, PD and support are very limited.

School completion rates are very good for students commencing Year 12 – but we lose a lot at end of year 10 and 11 – apprenticeships, employment etc. Students who are deferring Melbourne uni places do not always actually get there – they get used to a wage and the social side of leaving family and friends is a major factor. Clearly completion rates are lower.

VCAL and VETiS both played a large role in retention. They provided viable options for students who would not have stayed otherwise. Higher participation in VCAL does have a negative impact when university entrance %s are compared.

- **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.**

Participation in non university post school pathways is an important and growing option for students. However often the same questions of cost and accessibility come into play.

Many students pursue apprenticeships and traineeships. Student who complete year 11 often take the opportunity to leave school and take on an apprenticeship. Year 12 students either take on an apprenticeship in a trade area and many students who defer their university place complete a traineeship in their year before attending university.

Life has historically been fairly comfortable in South Gippsland and although economic forces are changing this – it still remains the case that many potential candidates for tertiary studies weigh up the costs associated with moving away to study and find the opportunity not incentive enough. The gap between what young people see their families and friends having and what they might have if they studied or trained further is not sufficient to drive them to the inconvenience of making the change. There are too few role models to inspire students and too little representation by the tertiary institutions.

Our students do look at TAFE and pre-apprenticeships as a viable pathway.

Employment, apprenticeships, TAFE and other non-uni training is growing and will probably continue to grow.

Huge numbers of students in Sunraysia take up work and apprenticeships in Year 10, Year 11 and some in Year 12.

There is a high participation in TAFE as Cranbourne is close. Transport is available.
- Potential geographic, economic, social, cultural and other influences on university applications, offers, acceptances and completions across Victorian communities.

Schools indicated a variety of geographic, economic, social and cultural impediments to students participating in higher education.

*There is a lot of $$ being made in this area by unskilled workers, therefore some students do not see the value of Tertiary education as their parents are currently making a good living without the education;*

*Due to Warrnambool’s location in south west Victoria students need to leave home to complete their tertiary education. This is costly and students are encouraged to work for a year between finishing school and entering university. Parents question the value of students going on to tertiary education when they do not really know what they want to do. Many of these parents have not had experience with tertiary education. Some students find it hard to leave Warrnambool and study in Melbourne and will return home before finishing their course.*

*The drought has had a major impact on the financial health of the area and has made the move from school straight to uni very difficult – hence the rise in deferrals. As stated earlier, not all deferrals are then taken up a year later*

*Too far from Melbourne and Adelaide and hence high travel costs. Families can’t afford accommodation in Melbourne. Students often prefer being in the safe homely environment of Mildura.*

City schools indicated more social and cultural issues around aspirations as major impediments.

*Social and cultural expectations and role models have an enormous influence on university participation. The large Asian demographic attending the college has a social and cultural expectation of academic achievement which affects student motivation strongly.*

*We have a very multi-cultural group – families have high expectations and many families have a tertiary qualified parent. This ‘norm’ makes the concept of undertaking university an everyday idea rather than the exception.*

*They don’t have university education modelled to them by anyone they know. Almost no family members have completed any form of tertiary education.*

- Advantages and disadvantages of participation and non-participation in higher education for school leavers and their families and communities in different metropolitan, rural and regional areas.

Aspirational goals and role models are identified as significant factors in student choices.
Students in country areas lack role models for the possibilities for what “education” provides them – particularly the lower socio-economic group – lack of aspirational goals from families; some inter-generational welfare recipient families have to break the cycle and change views of what can be achieved through education. How does the broader community and Govt. agencies change this lack of aspirational goals? A cross-sector and co-ordinated suite of social policies would help - some things are beyond just what schools alone can realistically achieve in order to have a significant impact.

Advantages of participation in higher education.
- Greater chance to find a rewarding and challenging career.
- Greater employment opportunities.
- Higher salaries.
- When completed their courses they can bring skills back to the local community.
- Graduates contribute to the cultural and community life in a positive fashion.

Disadvantages of participation in higher education.
- Students leave for university and in Melbourne and do not return. “Brain Drain”
- Students leaving leave a void in the community of the age group from 18 to 25.

It is obvious that rural students have additional financial and social issues if they have to re-locate to pursue further education. Equally obviously family finances play a major and direct role. Recently rural students have had difficulty gaining access to on site residences at unis etc, anecdotally because many are taken up with overseas fee paying students.

The cost of studying rather than working would be a factor in our students’ decisions. Many would choose work over study for practical reasons.

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

Schools identified geography as a significant factor influencing student choice.

*It is less likely that metropolitan graduates will want to move to rural areas to work.*

*Students leaving the district puts a strain on the skill shortage in professional fields. Students who are left tend to take up apprenticeships, hospitality, retail etc.*

*The community is continually trying to recruit professionals from outside the geographical area.*

*They tend to go for trades that they are familiar with, especially where they have a family member who can get them started in a trade*

- **Strategies to address any barriers contributing to geographic differences in participation in higher education.**

Schools suggested a wide suite of strategies. Most of which require cooperation between Federal and State governments and the will on behalf of politicians to actively address this problem and not just talk about it.
Subsidise living costs for country students and offer long-term scholarships for country students. These two things would help 100% of our students to both think about applying and actually take up a place at University. It would also acknowledge the difference for country and metropolitan students, which is currently now not a consideration. Transition programs (i.e. residential) – maybe starting in Yr. 10 (could we somehow include families in this?) – a targeted initiative for Regional Offices to organise and coordinate between each other (as distinct from individual schools who may overlap or not have staffing to facilitate this effectively).

**Improvements to be considered:**
- Employer incentives for those who take on Work Experience and Structured Workplace Learning placements for more than 20 days per year;
- More travel and accommodation scholarships/allowances for rural students;
- $$ for relocating;
- Incentives for young people to leave home town to gain apprenticeships/jobs in other regions;
- Weekly boarding places for student/young people to do Work Experience/SWL in another area e.g. with employers families;
- Travel allowance for students/young people to travel home on weekends;
- Regional Offices to develop and facilitate a Sister School Exchange Program for rural and city VCAL students so work opportunities and broader options can be explored respectively (this would ensure equity and consistency in such a program). This could be done by developing relationships before-hand via email and matching students with similar interests (perhaps with billeting or camp exchange);
- Exposure to work place, VET in school allows students to gain a better understanding of expectations (this provides a safety net) – in addition, it takes away some of the mystery.

**General comments:**
- Currently there is plenty of work in Retail or Hospitality;
- Public transport does not run at reasonable hours to access TAFE/uni in neighbouring towns;
- Many young people (particularly boys) will not leave town for a job or Apprenticeship;
- Limited places with employers for work placements and School-Based Apprenticeships (this is factored in to VCAL places);
- VCAL generally has positive outcomes for those that engage in the program - in to apprenticeships/TAFE/jobs;
- Those students with clear goals generally complete Year 12 and then have successful transition in to relevant courses;
- There are often pressures from families for kids to begin work due to low family income;
- Social and other family issues influence some students decisions to leave to seek work (see comment above);

**Issues:**
- Re: Federally-funded positions – in our area we have only seen a limited rise in ASBAs;
- There have been no increases in SWL placements;
- Transport;
- Inconsistency with policy re: gaining placement i.e. we have the ATC Placement Officer who brokers a placement for their students but the LCP is an employer consultant and the
students are required to find their own placement, therefore competing for the limited placements available;

**These are some other points that some senior students made today** *(15/2/08)*:
- Accommodation and living expenses are out of reach for some
- Youth Allowance cuts off too many kids as it is asset-based, which doesn't help with day-to-day costs and is unrealistic for most country kids' situations (i.e. based on farm, business etc.)
- Independent age is 21 (too high)
- is also calculated over a number of years' income (doesn't allow for loss of job)
- Not enough places in some courses; also drives up scores
- Some places close by are not what they want to do (uni itself or course)
- Costs still high for close unis (100km: petrol, cars; food & accommodation)

*They were interested to know where the info was heading and that someone was actually going to listen.*

**Increase the variety of courses delivered at rural and regional campuses.**
Give scholarships to students who will return to work in their local area after completion of their course.
Develop Co-Operative courses with industry with placements in the South West.
Assistance for accommodation should be given to any student that needs to leave their home to study in another area.

We have worked on developing partnerships with universities and the TAFE sector. We offer VET to surrounding schools and we allow interchange between ours and the TAFE sector.

**Rural students (and those from lower socio-economic groups) need access to low cost, preferably on-site accommodation.** Some families of 2007 year 12 students are still travelling to Melbourne in early February seeking accommodation because they were not informed they would not gain on-site accommodation until the end of January – surely the unis knew this well before the end of last year

**Funding needs to be allocated to travel and board in locations when >100 kms from city or chosen uni**

Comments from City schools included:

They have to believe that they can go to University and that they can succeed.

**Awareness – funded opportunities to bring all year 9/10 students to 1 or 2 tertiary locations, show them what is available and how it is accessible. Have tertiary students from more difficult circumstances (eg distance/financial) talk to them about how it can be achieved. Show them it is possible.**

**Increase ‘online’ course opportunities – perhaps with ‘blocks’ of attendance time during the year so that students can still undertake work and do not necessarily have to leave their home town/community?**
Recommendations

1. That the Victorian Government secures a commitment from the Federal Government to alter the Youth Allowance rules so that the “age of independence” is reduced to 18 years and that living away from home expenses (accommodation & travel) are resourced at a realistic level so that students are not required to seek part-time work that often impacts negatively in their study or delays their entry to University.

2. That the Victorian Government secures a commitment from the Federal Government to fund an expansion of provision of tertiary programs in regional areas. This could include an increase in on-line block study so students don’t have to leave their area for study over an extended period of time.

3. That the Victorian Government secures a commitment from the Federal Government to fund scholarships for country students who, subject to work availability, agree to return to work in a rural locality at the conclusion of their course.

4. That the Victorian Government secures a commitment from the Federal Government to fund a significant increase in the number of Australian School Based Apprenticeship places.

5. That both levels of Government urgently address the need for more teacher training, re-training and PD support for teachers to deliver courses in skill shortage areas.

6. That both levels of Government urgently address the prohibitive cost of VETiS programs and the limitation this imposes on the breadth of provision, particularly in areas of skill shortage.

7. That both levels of Government urgently address the need for employer subsidies for the provision of work experience and structured workplace learning placements.

8. That the Victorian Government encourages and assists schools to resource the provision of applied learning programs (pre-VCAL) at Years 9 & 10 to encourage student engagement and retention.

9. That the Victorian Government encourages the publication of data that focuses on student destinations and successful completion by publishing data on individual schools’ student success rate in tertiary studies or apprenticeship completion.

10. That the Victorian Government encourages higher student aspirations and better cultural understanding by fostering and subsidising a metropolitan and rural student exchange program.

11. That the Victorian Government initiates a public education campaign to encourage students, families and the community to value applied pathways as highly aspirational destinations.

Brian Burgess
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