Submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry into Geographical Difference in the Rate in which Victorian Students Participate in Higher Education

Education and Training Committee

April 2008
'The most significant influence on human capital, and life chances, is education and training.'\(^1\)

‘A young person’s education does not occur in isolation from the other parts of a young person’s life, although the traditional government systems often respond this way’.\(^2\)

Introduction

The Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS) is the peak body of the social and community sector in Victoria. VCOSS works to ensure that all Victorians have access to and a fair share of the community’s resources and services, through advocating for the development of a sustainable, fair and equitable society.

VCOSS members reflect a wide diversity, with members ranging from large charities, sector peak organisations, small community services, advocacy groups and individuals in social policy debates.

VCOSS Vision

VCOSS is committed to living out the principles of equity and justice, and acknowledges we live in a society where people are interdependent of one another. VCOSS respects the land we live in and recognises the Indigenous custodians of the country. VCOSS is committed to reconciling all injustices with Indigenous Australians.

The VCOSS vision is one where social well being is a national priority, and:

- Ensures everyone has access to and a fair share of the community’s resources and services
- Involves all people as equals, without discrimination; and
- Values and encourages people’s participation in decision making about their own lives and their community

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

VCOSS and VCOSS members have a strong interest in the rate in which Victorian students participate in higher education. This interest is not simply in relation to the geographical differences and the impact that these have on participation in higher education, but also the broad range of other issues that impact on Victorian students, particularly those students who experience disadvantage. Participation in higher education and the issues that impact on participation, particularly geographic differences, encompass many of the areas in which VCOSS undertakes policy advocacy work, including education and training, children, young people and families, transport, cost of living, Indigenous issues, climate change and drought.

Participation in quality, accessible education and training is fundamental for individuals’ economic and social participation, as well as promoting economic growth and breaking intergenerational cycles of disadvantage; and strengthening the capacity of communities. Not only is participation in university education important, participation in other further-education and training opportunities, such as Adult and Community Education, TAFE, apprenticeships and other skills-based learning, is equally as important. A high quality system of early childhood and compulsory education is essential if people are going to make the transition in further study, employment or training.

The influence of secondary school participation

Participation and retention in secondary school education increases the level of participation in higher education, training or work. A person’s level of engagement in study, training or work decreases in-line with their level of education attainment.\(^3\)

Young people living in the interface municipalities\(^4\) of Melbourne have lower levels of completion of Years 10 and 12, than students in metropolitan Melbourne. This, in turn, is linked to lower percentages of young people from

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\(^4\) Interface municipalities are Cardinia, Casey, Hume, Melton, Mornington Peninsula, Nillumbik, Whittlesea, Wyndham and Yarra Ranges.
these areas participating in higher education than for the State and Metropolitan Melbourne.\(^5\)

The rates of secondary school retention for rural and remote young people are reducing due to a number of factors. Financial issues are one of the central reasons why rural and regional young people are leaving secondary school early. The current drought has resulted in an increase in the number of young people leaving school early to save their parents the financial stress of higher education or to take work if it is available to become financially independent to relieve the financial burden from their families\(^6\).

In the Wimmera, the area in Victoria affected for the longest period by drought, young people who have been accepted into a university course are deferring because their families cannot afford to support their move to their place of study. In 2007, many young people had intended to seek employment to enable them to afford to move. However, at the end of 2007 many had not been able to obtain employment due to the economic down-turn in the area and so were forced with not being about attend university, nor obtain local employment.\(^7\)

The role of the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) and Vocational Education and Training (VET)

Participation in VCAL and VET can also be linked to increased participation in higher education. For students who are at-risk of becoming disengaged from the education system school, VCAL and VET play a crucial role in retaining them within the education system through the provision of a broader curriculum and more flexible and adaptive learning environment. Currently a range of barriers restrict young people’s participation in VCAL and VET programs.

A recent example from a VCOSS member in the Wimmera in Western Victoria highlights the barrier of transport costs. To access VET and VCAL young

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7 VCOSS, discussion with Wimmera UnitingCare, October 2007.
people in the Wimmera travel considerable distances in the majority of cases and this is often done via the young people accessing VET and VCAL programs through the school bus network. However, school bus contracts only cover the journey to and from school, with families this year being required to pay $350.00 for the additional bus journey to one of the three sites providing VET and VCAL. In this severely drought affected community, a number of families are unable to afford this fee, resulting in many young people being unable to attend VET and VCAL classes.

VCOSS believes that an urgent review is required as to what is included in school bus contracts so that it can be expanded to include essential travel outside of the journey to and from school. VET and VCAL are designed to keep young people engaged in education, however if they are unable to attend class, there is a significant risk that they will not only disengage with the secondary school system, but as a result they will not participate in higher education.

**More flexible models of education**

Currently in Victoria there is a lack of sustainable and funded strategies to re-engage disengaged young people back into the education system. While there are VCE, VET and VCAL opportunities at mainstream schools, there also needs to be increased attention in the later years of education to provide more flexible learning environments for young people who are disengaged or at-risk of disengaging from the education system. The provision of flexible learning environments provide young people with varied and specialised opportunities, outside mainstream schools, to remain engaged or re-engage with education.

Opportunities are generally limited for marginalised and vulnerable young people to re-engage in education given the issues that they face and their need for high level intensive educational and social support. More flexible models of education will not only influence school retention more broadly, but will also hopefully impact upon the potential for these young people to access post-school pathways and higher education.

Vulnerable young people, such as those with mental health issues, who have become a young parent, who experience family violence or who are in state...
care, require intensive social and educational supports to enable them to continue their learning. For example, young people in residential care often experience upheaval in the final years of schools, with a high percentage changing schools and an increased rate of absenteeism, impacting on their failure to engage with higher education. Schools are the ideal entry point for the provision of additional support and enabling linkages. However, schools are naturally focused primarily on the educational needs of students. To better address the social needs of children and young people, it is critical that schools are networked and integrated with a range of other community services and structures. In some instances, linkages will be sufficient – in other areas, alternative settings will be required.

MacKillop Family Services has developed the St Augustine’s Education and Training Unit and Rice Education and Youth Services to deliver specialist education and support to young people who have complex needs or who are experiencing severe difficulty with mainstream schooling. Part of these programs includes a full-time withdrawal education service for children and young people who are having difficulty participating in mainstream schooling so that they are able to continue their learning in a safe and supportive environment.

VCOSS believes that another key way of enabling vulnerable young people to remain engaged, or re-engage, in the education system is for Government to resource more flexible learning environments to better support their education outcomes of vulnerable young people. The NetSchool model developed in Bendigo is one example of an alternative education model that is successfully meeting the needs of vulnerable young people aged 15-21. NetSchool provides vulnerable young people with access to continuing their education through the development of centre-based and home-based learning.

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9 MacKillop Family Services, Unpublished submission to the Parliamentary inquiry into geographical differences in the rate in which Victorian students participate in higher education, Melbourne, 2008.
A third example is that of a deemed enrolment model. A Deemed Enrolment model developed by St Luke’s Anglicare, the regional office of the then Department of Education and Training and the four local secondary colleges in Bendigo focuses on supporting young people aged 12-15 who are at risk of or who have disengaged from the education system, with the objective of them re-engaging. A formal review of the outcomes from this model is currently being completed. Models such as this more flexible deemed enrolment model should be adequately resourced and developed so that they could be rolled out across Victoria.

Investment in more flexible and alternative models of education in geographic locations with high numbers of vulnerable young people would result in increased participation in higher education.

**More flexible post school pathways**

In addition to the previously discussed alternate and more flexible models of education, there are a range of post-school pathways that have the capacity to increase participation in higher education.

Adult and Community Education (ACE) plays a vital role in post-school education and training. ACE providers, such as neighbourhood houses or Registered Training Organisations (RTOs), play a vital role in assisting and encouraging both young people and adult learners to return to study and subsequently consider taking up higher education opportunities. The importance of ACE as an educational pathway into higher education is further highlighted in the submission to this inquiry from the Association of Neighbourhood Houses and Learning Centres, a VCOSS member

Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLENs) also play an important role as a pathway into higher education. LLENs have responsibility for planning an integrated post-secondary education, training, social support and employment system that meet the needs of young people aged 15-19. They bring together key providers including, employers, local governments and community services organisations and. 12 Being a key interface of the education and training system, the LLENs have long had a concern about the relationship between geographical differences and the rate of participation in

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higher education and they are currently undertaking, in conjunction with the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (YACVic) and Melbourne University, a longitudinal study to better understand what is behind the higher deferral rates in rural and regional areas. The YACVic submission to this inquiry provides further discussion on the role of LLENs in Victoria.

Access and availability of post-school pathways in the communities young people live is another issue that impacts upon participation in higher education. In rural and regional areas impacted by drought there has been a reduction in access to traineeship and apprenticeship opportunities, as well as an increase in unemployment and underemployment. Young people in rural and regional communities also have to travel considerable distances to access TAFE or other training opportunities, meaning that often they are unable to attend due to financial constraints and also a lack of affordable transport options.

Geographic influences

Geographic location is a significant factor in the lower level of participation and completion of higher education by young people from rural and regional areas in Victoria.

Young people in regional, rural and remote areas are under-represented in post-compulsory education – while regional Australia comprises 36% of the population, only 17% of university students are from regional areas. There are a range of factors impacting on participation and the issues that these communities are facing are further compounding participation, such as extreme drought, rural restructuring and the financial costs of tertiary education. Many young people in rural and regional areas also have a commitment to remaining at home and work on the family farm due to the impact of the drought and the families inability to employ farm labour. The previous discussion of increasing university deferrals in the Wimmera is an example of hardship many rural and regional young people are experiencing.

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13 G Ferrari & J Rose (YACVic), discussion with the author, 26 March 2008.
14 Alston & Kent, p.18.
15...
17...
In addition, for many rural and regional young people, their families are unable to support their attendance at TAFE or university.

Geographic barriers to participation in higher education are not just relevant to young people living in regional, rural and remote areas, there are pressures on people who are not living in the metropolitan area more broadly. The location of higher education opportunities has a considerable influence on participation in higher education. For many young Victorians, moving away from the family home to study is not an option, so if a higher education institution is not located within an easily commutable location then they will be unable to attend.

Transport

Access to transport plays a considerable role in the ability of young people to be able to participate in higher education. For example, in many rural and regional communities the school bus network is the only public transport that is available, however the timing, destination and availability often does not correlate. While, school bus policy has been amended to enable people accessing post-secondary education to use school buses, if there are seats available, to access post-secondary education, this policy change has not been promoted to the community or to schools and principals. This has resulted in young people not being able to access post-secondary education via public transport in a number of communities.

Young people living outside inner-metropolitan Melbourne are often unable to easily access public transport, or the institution that they are attending involves excessive travel time on public transport. There are also issues around affordability of public transport, particularly for young people experiencing disadvantage. These factors frequently prevent many young people from participating in higher education. The increasing unaffordability of private vehicle ownership means that travelling by private car to university is also prohibitive for many young people, particularly those living in rural and regional Victoria.

VCOSS believes that one way to enhance the participation of young people in higher education, particular those with access to public transport, is to invest in programs such as the Pathways to Education program This program was
established by Travellers Aid in 2004 and its purpose was to reduce the education burden on families and sure that young people can access education and training, through issuing, predominantly annual, Metcards to students who cannot afford to get to their place of education. Programs such as this can go some of the way to addressing the role that geographical differences play in accessing higher education.

Disadvantaged students

Research demonstrates that educational disadvantage is becoming increasingly linked to geographical or place-based disadvantage with clear patterns of geographical disadvantage being evident in secondary-level education outcomes. The Victorian Government’s On Track survey of school leavers reports that as socio-economic status falls, so do students higher education aspirations and application rates and this is further compounded by the fact that students from government schools and financially disadvantaged communities are more likely to miss out on a university place due to increased competition for places.

Research has also highlighted that geographical differences in the rate that students participate in higher education relate to factors at earlier stages of education. Interventions that address the effects of disadvantages in the early years can compensate for the risk factors that can compromise a child’s development and in turn reduce disadvantage. It is clear that we need to be enabling students experiencing disadvantage to do well throughout the early years and compulsory schooling and that this will make a difference to the take-up of higher education. This in turn reinforces the need to have more flexible learning environments for students who experience disadvantage so as to better support their learning outcomes.

21 M Rout, ‘Public school students missing out on uni offers’, The Australian, 27 February 2008, online.
22 MacKillop Family Services
23 Department of Premier and Cabinet, National reform agenda: Victoria’s plan to improve outcomes in early childhood, Department of Premier and Cabinet, Melbourne, March 2007.
24 F Tomazin, ‘Cost of uni no barrier, study finds’, The Age, 18 March 2008, online.
The Victorian Auditor-General recently undertook an audit examining schools that had students performing below expected levels and whether the Government contributions to improve outcomes had been effective.\textsuperscript{25} This report revealed that 70 per cent of schools with students performing below expected levels were located within the Western-Metro, Southern-Metro and Northern-Metro education regions.\textsuperscript{26} These schools had high percentages of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, students with language backgrounds other than English and students with challenging behaviours.\textsuperscript{27} The Victorian Auditor-General made a number of recommendations to help improve measures to assist schools and students performing below expected levels, all of which were accepted by the Government. It is now vital that Government implement and act on these recommendations. All Victorian students need to receive the supports they require to enable them to meet expected educational levels throughout primary and secondary school.

**Financial cost of higher education**

The financial cost of accessing higher education is a key issue that influences participation in higher education.

HECS repayment can be financial constraint, particularly students who are required to move for students wishing to attend university and who could only get into a full-fee paying place the financial cost of higher education is more immediate, resulting in university being out of reach due to financial implications.

As noted previously, for many Victorians, higher education opportunities are neither located in close proximity to either where they live nor are convenient to public transport. This is particularly true for young people living in rural and regional communities. Therefore, many students must move away from home. Living away from home is incredibly costly and out of reach for many students and their families, particularly for those families impacted by the current drought. Recent research indicates that living away from home to complete a degree costs as much as $73,000 more than remaining at home.\textsuperscript{28} For young

\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{25} Victorian Auditor-General, *Improving our schools: Monitoring our support*, Victorian Government Printer, Melbourne, 2007.
\item\textsuperscript{26} \ldots
\item\textsuperscript{27} Victorian Auditor-General
\item\textsuperscript{28} M Rout, ‘High price of uni freedom’, *The Australian*, 19 March 2008, p.6.
\end{itemize}
people experiencing disadvantage, this is not a viable option and in many cases the costs of living rule out participation in higher education.

The current narrow parameters for Youth Allowance income support also influence many young people’s decision to not participate in higher education. Many young people are unable to access Youth Allowance due to the strict eligibility criteria for independence, which means that you are only deemed to be independent if you have either earned a specified income amount in an 18 month period or if you are over 25 years.\textsuperscript{29} If you do not meet these criteria, then your eligibility is assessed against your parents’ assets and income.\textsuperscript{30} For many rural and regional young people, particularly those in drought affected communities, their parents may appear to be asset rich but they are income poor, meaning that their families cannot afford to pay for them to study away from home.\textsuperscript{31} The narrow eligibility criteria for Youth Allowance may explain the high number of university deferrals, particularly for rural and remote young people, who are attempting to find employment to support their study.

While VCOSS understands that Youth Allowance falls out of the jurisdiction of the Victorian Government, we would urge Government to lobby at a Federal level for changes to the Youth Allowance eligibility criteria, which would enable young people to participate in higher education.

**Indigenous Victorians**

Indigenous Victorians continue to have poorer education outcomes across all age groups than non-Indigenous students.\textsuperscript{32} Currently, there is a lack of investment in primary and secondary education for Indigenous students which results in lower levels of Year 12 or equivalent completion rates. This is reflected in the data that highlights that Indigenous students are significantly less likely to enrol in tertiary study than non-Indigenous students.\textsuperscript{33}

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\item \textsuperscript{29} N Godden, p.11.
\item \textsuperscript{30} ... \\
\item \textsuperscript{31} N Godden, p.11.
\item \textsuperscript{33} Victorian Government Department of Human Services, p.67.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
While VCOSS welcomes the recent review of Indigenous education and the subsequent announcements to overhaul the way that the education system responds to the needs of Indigenous students, further investment is urgently required in indigenous education.

Social Inclusion

Currently there are many barriers within the traditional education system that prevent many children and young people, particularly those who experience disadvantage, from being included in all aspects of community life. Research highlights that young people who are unable to participate in further education or employment are at risk of being marginalised or socially excluded.  

VCOSS believes that Victorian education policy needs to be developed as part of a broader social inclusion framework. In 2007 the Ministerial Advisory Committee for Victorian Communities released its final report titled Social inclusion: The next steps for a fairer Victoria. This report recommended that there be further development of a strategy which addresses education attainment, retention and re-engagement.  

Education attainment, retention and re-engagement are central pillars and need to form the basis of a strategy that will address barriers to higher education participation. A strategy that addresses these key elements will mean that all Victorian students, regardless of geographic location, will be able to access a range of educational opportunities.

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