13 March 2008

Geoff Howard MP
Chair
Education and Training Committee
Parliament House
Spring Street
EAST MELBOURNE VIC 3002

Dear Mr Howard

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

The Victorian Farmers Federation (VFF) Australia’s largest state farmer organisation and the only recognised consistent voice on issues affecting rural Victoria welcomes the opportunity to provide comment on the above inquiry.

The VFF represents 15,000 farm enterprises across eight commodities including dairy, grains, livestock, horticulture, chicken meat, pig’s flowers and egg industries.

As a key beneficiary of education and training the Victorian farming community has a strong interest in the long term provision of quality education and training.

Enclosed is the submission from the Victorian Farmers Federation which provides an outline of what we believe are some of the key factors influencing the participation of young people in post compulsory education in rural and regional areas and our suggested solutions to overcome these barriers.

We note in your letter dated 21 January 2007 to the VFF that as part of the public consultation process the Committee will also be conducting a series of public hearings.

We would also like an opportunity to discuss the issues outlined in our submission.

Should you wish to discuss this further, please contact me on (03) 9207 5555.

Yours sincerely,

Simon Ramsay
President
VFF Submission

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

March 2008
Foreword

The Victorian Farmers Federation is Australia’s largest state farmer organisation, and the only recognised, consistent voice on issues affecting rural Victoria.

The VFF represents 19,000 farmer members, representing 15,000 farm enterprises. The VFF consists of an elected Board of Directors, a member representative Policy Council to set policy and eight commodity groups representing dairy, grains, livestock, horticulture, chicken meat, pigs, flowers and egg industries.

Farmers are elected by their peers to direct each of the commodity groups and are supported by Melbourne-based staff.

Each VFF member is represented locally by one of the 230 VFF branches across the state and through their commodity representatives at local, district, state and national levels. The VFF also represents farmers’ views on hundreds of industry and government forums.

Simon Ramsay
President
INTRODUCTION

The Victorian Farmers Federation wishes to provide comment for the Parliamentary Inquiry into Geographical Differences in the Rate in which Victorian Students participate in higher Education.

We note the focus of the inquiry includes:

- Factors influencing participation in different types of post compulsory education and training in different metropolitan, regional and rural areas;
- The advantages and disadvantages of participation in education and training for school leavers, families and communities in different metropolitan, regional and rural areas;
- Any skill shortages in the industry and the possible relationship to geographical differences in education and training participation; and
- Strategies to address any barriers contributing to geographical differences in participation in education and training.

As a key beneficiary of education and training, the Victorian farming community has a strong interest in the long term provision of quality education and training. The identified lower participation of young people from rural and regional areas in post compulsory education, in particular higher education, in comparison to metropolitan areas is a key concern of the farming sector.

Sustaining resilient and vibrant rural communities are important to both the future of the farming sector and the business community. We believe that this is more achievable by increased participation of young people in post compulsory education as they are the future of the country.

1. **Factors influencing participation in different types of post compulsory education and training in, regional and rural areas**

- The current funding to assist young people who have to move from rural and regional areas to metropolitan areas is inadequate and is contributing to the lower participation of young people in higher education.

- The current funding model does not recognise the distances for rural and regional students to travel to access education services at all levels of training.

Recent research undertaken by Charles Stuart University indicates that the annual cost for regional young people to study away from home is about $15,000-20,000 a year which is out of reach of many families in rural and regional areas. This is further compounded by the
fact the Youth Allowance does not adequately cover these costs. Many rural families are not aware that their children may be eligible for this support.

Many young people are deferring their studies due to the high costs and financial hardship and are undertaking a GAP year between completing Year 12 and commencing higher education. Anecdotally, evidence suggests that 1 in 4 young people who have deferred in the South West of Victoria are not returning to study due to their capacity to earn money and be employed elsewhere.

- **A lack of well resourced and appropriate educational pathways in the country is another factor impacting on participation levels of young people in post compulsory education, in particular higher education.**

Evidence suggests that higher numbers of young people drop out of school prior to completing Year 12 in the rural areas in comparison to metropolitan. For the period 2002 to 2007 there has been a marked decline in retention rates (between 7 and 12 and between years 10 and 12) in government schools in the country. The retention rate in 2006 for metropolitan schools was 84.4% compared to 85.5% in 2002 (drop of 1.2%) whereas every Victorian country region Victoria the retention rates in 2006 were 68.5% compared to 72.0 in 2002 (drop of 3.5%) **Source: Summary Statistics for Victorian schools July 2006**.

The Government also carries out annual surveys of Victorian school leavers and for the years 2003 to 2005 the proportion of rural students going onto higher education has been much lower than Melbourne students, there has been a consistent although small decline in the proportion of rural students going onto higher education (**Source Annual Survey Victorian Government**).

A considerable percentage of young people in Year 12 would undertake post-compulsory study if the appropriate educational pathways were made available. Many regional centres do not have the appropriate level of funding available to provide TAFE programs that meet the needs of the local community, forcing many young people to either move from rural areas or not enrol in TAFE or higher education institutions. By offering greater access to TAFE programs in rural and regional areas this will provide an alternative pathway for students to undertake higher education and thereby creating a sustainable future for post compulsory education.

In respect to numbers enrolled at university, with the exception of the Central Highlands there has been an overall decrease in numbers of students going directly to university. The decline in numbers of students enrolling directly in university from Gippsland, the Mailee and Western District are particularly concerning (**Source VTAC annual statistics percentage change 01/02 to 2005/2006**).

- **Limited availability of subjects offered in country schools and by post compulsory providers in rural and regional areas can be seen as a contributing factor to the lower participation of young people from rural and regional areas in higher education.**
It is evident that in metropolitan areas there is a broader range of subjects available to young people and the opportunity to attend other schools or tertiary providers if the course of study is not offered at their school which provides them with greater choice of career pathways.

This is not often the case in rural and regional areas. The limited availability of subjects at both school and TAFE puts country students at a distinct disadvantage over their metropolitan counterparts. Often subjects are not available due to the shortage of skilled teachers.

- **Shortage of skilled and knowledgeable careers teachers.**

The shortage of well skilled teachers in rural and regional areas has also contributed to the lack of students understanding of career pathways. Often young people are not participating in higher education because they do not understand what career pathways are available to them in the future.

- **A family culture that does not support higher education**

The influence of the family on a young person’s career pathway, cannot be overlooked, and in many traditional rural communities there has been a culture amongst farming families of not undertaking higher education. They often lack the knowledge and understanding of the wider choices of careers that are available. The concept of a career in agriculture and horticulture in some farming families is discouraged due to their negative perception of farming sector.

2 **The advantages and disadvantages of participation in education and training for school leavers, families and communities in regional and rural area.**

Creating more vibrant and resilient rural communities is seen by the farming industry as a critical factor to the future of the agricultural industry.

Greater participation by young people in education and training particularly at post compulsory level provides an opportunity for the communities in which they live to grow both socially and economically. Through participating in training, young rural people are able to develop their confidence thus enabling them to contribute much more effectively to their local community and broaden their involvement in community activities e.g. local fire brigade service clubs. This will help build skills and knowledge in our young people and with that will come the confidence and the ability to manage or deal with complex issues and change. Towns with high levels of social capital have proven to be more resilient and better able to cope with large scale change.
3 Any skill shortages in the industry and the possible relationship to geographical differences in education and training participation

It is widely recognized by the Victorian farming sector that there is a chronic shortage of skilled people in agriculture, over and above conditions caused by the drought. The difficulty of sourcing skilled labour on farms is becoming a significant issue and is affecting decisions with respect to the farm business in a number of ways. The purchase of machinery to reduce labour inputs and changing the enterprise mix, such as moving to total cropping from mixed farming, or moving to less intensive forms of animal production such as sheep to cattle are some ways in which farmers are coping with this shortage.

With a low national unemployment rate there is strong competition for labour with other industry sectors particularly in the traditional trades and the mining sector. We are of the opinion that the negative public perception of agriculture has, to some degree, contributed to the current skills shortage and the shortage of agriculture students and that young people are not aware of the range of opportunities in the agriculture industry.

The portrayal of the farming sector by metropolitan media does not provide an accurate picture of agricultural business and therefore contributes to young person’s negative perception of farming as a future career path. Not only is there a shortage of skilled people within agriculture but the regional areas are also being affected by a lack of general skill shortages with the regional areas competing for same workforce as the metropolitan areas.

The issue of attracting postgraduates and professionals such as medical practitioners and nursing staff to rural and regional areas is linked to the training programs offered and lack of government incentives to encourage them to live in rural and regional areas. Most higher education programs for such professionals are generally offered in metropolitan areas and students are not exposed to rural and regional areas throughout their studies. In most programs there is not a compulsory placement in rural and regional areas.

A key issue is the “drift” of young people to urban areas. Young people are moving to urban areas to participate in post compulsory education and training that is not offered in rural and regional centres. With no evidence of an arrest in this decline, concerns abound as to the future of expertise to maintain agricultural enterprises as well as the wider issue of the structural stability of regional towns where a skilled workforce, required to maintain accessibility of basic services such as electrics, plumbing, emergency and medical services, is also in steady decline.
A RANGE OF SOLUTIONS

- The Victorian State Government must provide a more sustainable and equitable funding model for rural education that acknowledges the difference between delivery in regional Victoria and metropolitan Victoria with the model recognising the distances for rural and regional students to travel to access education services at all levels of training.

- Developing of well funded appropriate pathways into post compulsory education be it TAFE or higher education including the implementation of a consistent approach to articulation of programs between all TAFES and universities within Victoria.

- Rural providers must be given the necessary resources to provide a breadth of curriculum and educational opportunities for rural families. Funding should also be provided to vocational training providers to cover transportation costs of rural students to attend off the job and the on the job components of their studies.

- Establishment of regional universities are a preferred option as country people incur significant costs in undertaking higher education and are usually required to relocate to participate in studies. Situating higher education delivery in large rural regional centres to ensure greater accessibility for students and greater flow on to successful rural communities and economic development.

- A review of the current funding made available to assist young people who have to move from rural and regional areas to metropolitan areas to study. The new funding model to provide for a reasonable living away allowance that recognises the true costs associated with living away from home.

- Review the criteria for access to Student Allowance, reducing the period that young people have to work fulltime from 18 months to 12 months before they are eligible to apply for Youth Allowance in their own right. The current 18 months means generally young people are unable to commence their studies until the middle of the academic year.

- Review the current pathways to higher education to ensure there are increased opportunities for young people access higher education.

We believe the approach undertaken by the University of Ballarat in the development of an entry level program that allows regional and rural VCE students to be considered for a university place based on their overall ability and potential to succeed rather than just their ENTER score has merit and should be explored further.

- Develop targeted initiatives to attract post graduates and other skilled labour to rural and regional areas.
• Where a course of study has relevance to rural communities and a work placement is a compulsory component the universities provide for a placement in both rural and urban communities.
• Scholarships to encourage people to study in rural areas.
• Improved access to Information Technology including flexible delivery.