Inquiry Into Geographical Differences in the Rate at Which Victorian Students Participate in Higher Education.


Introduction:

I would like to congratulate the Parliament for agreeing to such an inquiry.

No doubt those who initiated this inquiry have observed, as I had upon tracking my ex primary school students

……. that the participation of students in higher education is not necessarily related to a student’s ability, but to a whole host of factors that has more to do with family culture, economics, geography and social networks. In fact in many cases, it has little to do with the natural talents of the student in question.

Under the Terms of Reference, I would be pleased to comment on the issues I believe has brought about such marked geographical differences in participation rates. As a resident of Traralgon my interest is specifically in the Latrobe Valley. However the same may well be said of areas such as Melbourne’s northern suburbs and other regional areas.

While I understand that much you will hear, you will have heard before at these hearings, I trust I can, through some ‘home grown statistics,’ observations and personal reflections add to the depth of knowledge you will have gained through listening to and reading submissions.

The inquiry is a very wide, so I confine myself to Terms of Reference (a) and (d) prior to being brave enough to suggest some strategies to address the barriers.

Comments on Terms of Reference.

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

When looking at applications, offers and acceptance rates, it becomes clear that students from regional areas do not participate to the same extent as their city counterparts. This is exacerbated when you take in factors such as

Independent schools vs Government schools

Small country towns vs large regional centres
(small country secondary colleges have produced the most extraordinary results)

Socio economic disadvantage.
So all this is intensified when you look at kids in government schools, in regional Victoria in poor socio economic areas. Let’s look at the results for the Latrobe Valley, taken from the 2006 VCE statistics published in the Herald Sun under FOI.

One telling statistic relates to student aspirations. In the Latrobe Valley, the statistics show us that in the 2006 VCE year a mere 54% of students even bothered to apply for a university or TAFE place. Nearly 50% of kids in the Latrobe didn’t even bother to fill in the form. This is despite having a campus of Monash University in the midst of the Latrobe Valley.

This compares to 81% of students in the metropolitan area.

My own feeling based on working in Latrobe Valley schools is that the issue of aspirations is a cultural one rather than one based on what schools might or might not be doing.

One strategy that must be considered then is that of being more pro active in encouraging government students from low socio economic areas to at least consider pursuing the tertiary option.

Potential geographic, economic, social, cultural and other influences on university applications, offers, acceptances and completions across Victorian communities.

I won’t dwell on the economic factors governing significantly lower participation rates from regional students. My own knowledge and observations back up that mentioned in the written submission from Girton Grammar School in Bendigo: that from the set of successful students the actual take up rate of students in regional Victoria pales against that of their city counterpart.

As at April 2007, only 57% of Gippsland students had actually taken up the tertiary option (the 57% includes those who deferred). This compares to 71% for students in government metropolitan schools.

While the economic factor has been a well worn path for your respondents, (you’ll have a thousand quotes about the costs of relocating etc) there is a cultural factor in areas such as the Latrobe Valley that hasn’t been given the same exposure.

In families from low socio economic areas, the very thought of a tertiary future for their child is off the radar. Many of these families see universities as ‘here is a world with which we are not familiar; a club to which we cannot belong.’ But in these families there are some clever clever kids. They are missing out badly.

The culture of a family far over rides (in my experience) the culture of the classroom and the culture of the school. I’m now even more convinced about this since being employed part time at an independent school in Traralgon.

Tracking students from my previous school revealed overwhelmingly that only students whose parents had been to university followed the tertiary option. There were some exceptionally clever students among those not pursuing further studies. It is a
cycle that needs to be broken. Another strategy must relate to how to best break this cycle.

Firstly though, we need to agree it is a cycle worth breaking. Does a more tertiary educated community make better citizens through their broader education, better opportunities, greater maturity when entering the workforce and contact with a wider spectrum of people including overseas students?

If it does, then not only must we ensure the vast majority of students complete Year 12, but a greater percentage of students incorporating a wider socio-economic spectrum consider the tertiary option.

But with cultural factors, relocation costs and the prospect of a significant HECS debt, it is little wonder so many families from Regional Victoria, do not consider a university or TAFE education for their children.

Strategies to address any barriers contributing to geographical differences in participation in higher education.

At my regional primary school from a disadvantaged area, we took students on camp to Melbourne University. The children observed students only 6 or 7 years older than them. We asked the kids to ‘imagine’ themselves at university. Such a tiny beginning may provide powerful motivation… it happened in my family.

The universities themselves can offer ‘outreach’ programs for upper primary and secondary school students. Somehow we must touch a nerve in children, which no one else will touch unless we do it for them.

There is a smattering of schemes addressing disadvantage, but can these be extended to include ALL successful applicants in regional area whose parents have not had a tertiary education.

No government is going to abolish HECS. There will be no 18 year old equivalent of the baby bonus. But let’s not dismiss these thoughts totally. There must be some creative or lateral solutions to lessen the debt hanging over the head of young people before they even start their careers: a job perhaps for a separate ‘think tank.’

Even with the baby bonus there can be creative thinking. Consider the parent who puts aside the $5000 for later education. $5000 @ 8% compound interest generates over $20 000 when the student is 18 and over $34 000 when they are 25. While I understand about inflationary effects a government guaranteed scheme would provide a starting point for families on all incomes.

Conclusion

In the time this inquiry has been running, naturally enough I’ve had my ear to the ground in regards to media reports. Many times I have heard talk about the very issues this inquiry is looking at. It is a very relevant inquiry. In a recent radio report there was a spokesperson for the Isolated Children / Parents Association. They spoke in terms of $6000 per annum for relocation and living assistance.
In the VCE system if a child from Ringwood North and a child from Tubbut wish to enroll at the same course at Latrobe University, they have (theoretically) an equal opportunity to gain access. But in the practical sense, the scenario is far from equal.

I understand there have been a massive number of recommendations made to this committee. I hope my thoughts and perspectives have been of some assistance.