Submission to the Education and Training Committee by WORKCO Limited

(1). The differences in Higher Education Participation across geographical regions

WORKCO Limited is a Group Training and Registered Training organisation based in the Wimmera and Grampians region of Victoria. Our RTO incorporates Longerenong College which provides Cert III and above training in agriculture and related industries. WORKCO’s 21 year history allows our organisation to have a unique view of the differences in participation rates in different post-school pathways across the geographic region.

Participation rates in Higher Education across Victoria differ from region to region. Through our own and other organisation’s research, evidence shows that the Wimmera and Southern Mallee Region had 31.1% of 2006 Year 12 school leavers attend university, and 18.6% employed in either an apprenticeship or traineeship. The apprentice/trainee participation rates have increased from 2005, however we feel that participation needs to increase further in apprenticeships and traineeships to tackle Australia’s skills shortage in traditional trade areas.

WORKCO Limited currently employs 300 apprentices and trainees throughout the region and in metropolitan Melbourne. An observation which is continually made regarding our Wimmera/Grampians clients is the limited access to trade school training in the region.

Trade school training catered for in the Wimmera region is limited, with only a very limited number of industries catered for. These include Hairdressing, Building and Construction, Automotive, Agriculture, Meat Processing, Horticulture and some Engineering trades. Apprentices working in every other industry are forced to source training in Melbourne or other metropolitan areas and regional centres. This results in financial pressure for particularly first and second year apprentices. The average wage for a first year building apprentice is around $330.00, which is inadequate compared to accommodation, food, travel and related expenses when attending trade school, and therefore apprentices often cannot afford week blocks away from home.

Accommodation is also an issue when having to stay overnight for trade school, particularly for those apprentices who do not have family or friends that they can board with. Even with relevant incentives (such as the State Government Accommodation Allowance of $25 per night) apprentices find traveling to trade school a huge financial burden to themselves and families. The cost of fuel is also becoming a problem for those apprentices with their own transport. These issues all play a factor in young people participating in higher education.

For younger apprentices who do not have their own licence and transport, traveling to trade school is another issue that reduces participation in higher education. Public transport does not directly link Horsham and surrounding towns with trade schools, with no direct transport to Warrnambool (South West TAFE), or Mildura (Sunraysia TAFE). This significantly limits the options when selecting trade school training for young apprentices. This is even more difficult for other more isolated towns in the region.

Further to this, young apprentices without a licence or their own transport on a first year wage often experience issues with transportation to their actual job. Living in a small town in the Wimmera and being employed by a tradesperson from another town is very difficult. There is no daily morning public transport to allow the apprentice to get to their job. Shifting to another town is very difficult financially given their low salary. Apprentices in this situation must rely on family and friends for daily transportation to their job, which is often very difficult.

Another issue for young apprentices is their parents (and often their own) reluctance to attend Trade School training in Melbourne, with some parents actively discouraging apprenticeships and

---

traineeships as an option. Some young people from country areas are not familiar with the city at all, and having to attend trade school in ‘the big smoke’ is very stressful and worrying for them. This reluctance to go to Melbourne also limits access to trade school in some industries.

Anecdotally, WORKCO Limited is currently experiencing decreasing rates of young people applying for apprentice and traineeship positions when advertised. There is often reluctance from parents and teachers to encourage young people into a trade, and University is sometimes pushed as the only post-school pathway option. However with the growing skills shortage in all geographical regions in Victoria, there is a need for both business and Government to jointly make trade skills more attractive as career options.

A possible solution to the above issues is to increase access to Trade school training, by increasing incentives for apprentices traveling from the region to training. This will allow participation rates in apprenticeship and traineeships to increase from the Wimmera and Grampians region.

Another possible solution is to allocate more funding to regional training centres to deliver apprenticeship training with small class numbers, allowing apprentices to train in their own regions and reducing the financial burden on themselves and families.

Increasing all apprentice wages via further government incentives, and to continually review and increase awards in lines with CPI increases is also an option to assist with apprenticeship issues.

*                                *                                *

To increase participation in Higher Education, early intervention with students is critical to allow young people to set goals for themselves and nurture an interest in higher education. Researchers describe Generation Y as a group that have a “short term focus”\(^\text{2}\) , which creates an attraction to low skill, high paying positions such as fast food outlets and industries such as mining in Western Australia. This is shown through the “On Track Survey” which shows an increase of approximately 15% from 2005 to 2006 of school leavers gaining full time or part time work (not including apprentices and trainees). Victorian Government bodies and employers need to encourage young people to firstly be interested in higher education and secondly reward young people for persevering with their training, instead of being employed in unskilled positions which have relatively low future progression opportunities.

A forward-thinking ‘early intervention’ initiative in the Wimmera and Grampians area which allows rural students to participate in Vocational Education and Training in Schools (VETiS) is the “VET Bus”. The VET Bus was established in 1998 by the Wimmera and Southern Mallee VET Cluster, to drive students from small towns to regional centres each week to their VETiS placement. Without this bus, parents had the difficult and time consuming process of driving their teenagers to VET placements themselves, or arranging car pooling. Some parents were either based at home or able to take one day a week off work, however students with parents both working full time often missed the opportunity to participate in VETiS, which was a huge opportunity missed for students interested in gaining skills in their chosen vocation. This project has been a resounding success with an increase of VETiS participation rates in the first few years of the VET bus in operation.

WORKCO Limited is currently developing a program to introduce primary school students to trades based industries. The initial idea of this program came from WORKCO’s involvement and organisation of the “Try a Trade” expo at the 2006 National Worldskills Competition. With the Group Training Association of Victoria (GTA Vic), WORKCO staff and Group Training apprentices assisted with trade stands which gave young people the opportunity to try out different trades. It was

identified by WORKCO and GTA Vic that many participants were primary school aged children. Feedback from both students and their parents has been extremely positive, with many commenting that these experiences are not currently achievable within school based programs.

We feel that introduction to all different career and industries at an early age is vital to increase participation rates in both higher education and other post school pathways such as apprenticeships and traineeships.

*                                *                                *

Longerenong College is in a unique position to gauge the participation rates of in Higher education in our region. Being a Registered Training Organisation, Longerenong College has tracked their student numbers for a number of years, and has evidence supporting increases and decreases in student numbers. In the 2008 school year, 51 students who initially showed interest in Longerenong’s various full time courses decided to not commence their studies. These students have been contacted to discuss their reasons for deferring, which included:
- 24 students wanted to work for 12 months and then decide what to do, study or work (which allows young people to be classed as independent for Centrelink Youth Allowance and other benefits).
- 4 people deferred the course
- 8 people were offered other tertiary positions
- 2 people felt too young to move away from home
- 5 people chose to go back to school and complete Year 12 studies instead of doing Certificate IV in Agriculture; and
- 4 people wanted to get an apprenticeship first before then heading back on the farm.

From the figures above, we can deduce that a large proportion did not enter into studies possibly because of financial difficulties linked to studying and not generating an income while doing so.

Each year, Longerenong College offers many scholarship opportunities to their students, through internal funding and sponsorship from local and national organisations and also the corporate sector. Many of the scholarships were based around financial hardship. In the past few years Longerenong College has experienced a significant increased application rate for these scholarships, with many students and their families identifying as being in financial hardship.

One of the major barriers for the Wimmera, Grampians and Southern Mallee region currently is the drought conditions, which are affecting the economy in many ways. Longerenong College, in particular, has also has anecdotal evidence that some students are not showing interest in their courses that were suited to working in agriculture, due to the drought and the lack of stability in the rural and farming industries at present.

Overall, WORKCO Limited sees many barriers for young people in participating in Higher Education, but the main reasons are lack of financial assistance, the marketing of higher education (particularly apprenticeships and traineeships, which are seen as not favourable) and the regional access to trade schooling. These issues are ones our group training apprentices face every day and we look to the committee to make positive recommendations to parliament to increase participation rates across all regions of Victoria.

John Ackland
Chief Executive Officer
WORKCO Limited
Enquiries: 0419 825 322.