YACVic’s Submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry into the Geographical Differences in the Rate in which Victorian Students Participate in Higher Education

Youth Affairs Council of Victoria Inc
Level 2, 172 Flinders St, Melbourne VIC 3000
Ph: (03) 9267 3799 Fax: (03) 9639 1622
Website: http://www.yacvic.org.au email: info@yacvic.org.au
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The following is submission has been made by the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria with relation to the Education and Training Committee Inquiry into Geographical Differences in the rate in which Victorian Students Participate in Higher Education.

For further comment or to clarify any content please contact Jen Rose, Manager Policy and Projects.

Yours Sincerely

Georgie Ferrari
Chief Executive Officer
Youth Affairs Council of Victoria
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Introduction

Youth Affairs Council of Victoria

The Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (YACVic) is the peak body representing the youth sector in Victoria. YACVic provides a means through which the youth sector and young people voice their opinions and concerns in regards to policy issues affecting them. YACVic works with and makes representations to government and serves as an advocate for the interests of young people, workers with young people and organisations that provide direct services to young people. YACVic also promotes and supports the participation of young people in debate and policy development areas that most affect them. YACVic’s resources are primarily directed towards policy analysis and development, research and consultation and to meeting the information, networking, education and training needs of our constituency.

About this submission

This submission will reflect both the policy perspective of the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria on the issue and the perspectives of young people consulted by YACVic. The focus of this submission is on the significantly lower rate of participation in higher education of young people in rural and regional Victoria and on some of the factors influencing their access to post-secondary education opportunities.

In 2007 YACVic embarked on a partnership study with 14 rural or regional Local Learning Employment Networks to better understand the reasons behind young people from rural and regional Victoria not taking up their tertiary offers. At this stage of the research no clear recommendations have been made. However, preliminary findings will be available in August this year, with further findings being developed in the 12 months to follow.
In this submission, YACVic will also highlight some of the findings of other research into rural and regional young people’s access to higher education and the findings of the Parliamentary Inquiry into Retaining Young People in Rural Towns and Communities Final Report released in 2006 by the Rural and Regional Services and Development Committee. YACVic asserts that the findings of this Parliamentary Inquiry, particularly those that relate to ‘Post –Secondary Training and Study’ are highly relevant to the subject of this inquiry. YACVic notes that the State Government has not broadly implemented the recommendations of this inquiry. YACVic recommends that this inquiry consider the recommendations already made by the Rural and Regional Services and Development Committee, particularly those that relate to access to education.

Key issues that this submission will focus on are:

• Deferment and re-enrolment rates of rural and regional young people.
• Youth Allowance and the high cost of living away from home for rural students.
• The impact of the drought.
• The skills shortage; and
• Transport disadvantage experienced by rural and regional young people.

Where relevant we will include some quotes and case study material highlighting young people’s experiences.

Deferment and re-enrolment rates of rural and regional young people

YACVic is seriously concerned by the disproportionate level at which young people from rural or regional Victoria defer a university placement and do not re-enrol in the course following that deferral. This issue has been raised with YACVic by members
and made clear to us in the broader work we have done focussing on issues for young people in rural Victoria. The concern for this issue, articulated to YACVic by several of the rural/regionally based Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLENs) has resulted in the development of the partnership study on this issue mentioned earlier in this submission.

Rural young people deferring at higher rates

Data collected through the *On Track* survey reveals the dramatically higher levels of deferral of higher education placements by young people in rural and regional Victoria as compared to young people in metropolitan Victoria. As was acknowledged by the Rural and Regional Services and Development Committee Final Report of the *Inquiry into Retaining Young People in Rural Towns and Communities*:

Rural young people are more than twice as likely as their urban peers to defer taking up a university place following the completion of high school.

In evidence collected by the 2006 *On Track* survey, 13.3% of rural students who completed VCE in 2005 deferred tertiary study in this year, as opposed to only 6% of students from metropolitan schools.¹

*On Track* data released in 2007 shows a gradual increase in deferral of study by rural young people over the last three years at a disproportionally higher rate than metropolitan students. Over the three years 2005 to 2007, the percentage of

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completers who deferred tertiary study has increased by five percentage points in non-metro regions but only by one percentage point in metro regions.\(^2\)

Results from the Centre for Postcompulsory Education and Lifelong Learning (CPELL) tracking surveys also reveal disturbing interstate comparisons between the deferral rates of Victorian students compared to students in Queensland and South Australia. Results from these surveys suggest that the rate of deferral by non-metropolitan students in Victoria is only slightly lower than the rate of deferral by South Australian non-metro students (15.7% in Vic as compared to 16.8% in SA). In the survey data Victorian rural students are recorded as deferring at a markedly higher rate than rural students in Queensland (15.7% in Vic compared to 10.4% in Queensland). YACVic recognises that there are a host of reasons that impact on a young person’s decision to defer. However, given the experience of geographic isolation possible in SA and QLD compared to Victoria, these statistics raise some questions around why Victorian students are deferring at such a comparatively high level.

Lower re-enrolment rates for rural young people

Higher deferral rates do translate into a lower rate of re-enrolment in higher education places by rural young people as compared to metropolitan young people. The Rural and Regional Services Committee heard disturbing evidence from Professor Rob Wallis, the Pro Vic-Chancellor (Regional and Rural) of Deakin University that:

“deferment rates for students in south-west Victoria are double those of Melbourne students.

The reason is almost always financial...[and]

importantly our data shows only about half these students re-enrol.”³

As the Inquiry noted, ‘it would appear that many who delay this transition for financial reasons never commence their intended higher education course.’⁴

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### Youth Allowance and the high costs of living away from home

While evidence suggests that there are a number of factors that can influence a young persons decision to defer their university placement, a key factor in the Victorian context is the need to defer in order to meet the requirements to access independent youth allowance.

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### The need to defer to access Independent Youth Allowance

In 2006, the Inquiry into Retaining Young People in Rural Towns and Communities reported that:

> On the basis of evidence provided to the Inquiry, however, the Committee considers it likely that a greater percentage of rural young people are deferring the start of university in order to accumulate the income they will need to fund further education, as well as to develop logical solutions for moving to an urban centre.

> Access to the independent youth allowance is one way in which rural young people seek to fund their university studies...As a result, for many rural young people whose parents are

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³ Evidence from professor Rob Wallis, Pro Vice Chancellor (Rural and Regional), Deakin University as sited in Rural and Regional Services and Development Committee, (2006). *op.cit.* See finding 6.28, p 209.

unable to support them to participate in tertiary education, deferring study to earn an income that will enable them to later access the independent youth allowance may be their only means to fund tertiary education.\(^5\)

There are a number of factors that are considered in determining if an individual may be eligible for independent youth allowance. Those most relevant to the issues of deferment from tertiary study are those that apply to school leavers. As the current Centrelink Youth Allowance brochure describes, you are considered independent if:

- You left secondary school at least 18 months ago and have earned at least 75 per cent of the maximum Wage Level A of the Australian Pay and Classification Scale generally applicable to trainees.
- You must have earned this amount since leaving school within an 18 month period – 75 per cent of the Wage Level A of the Australian Pay and Classifications Scale generally applicable to trainees, is currently $18,525.\(^6\)

In order to meet the needs of attending tertiary study, particularly where those costs are exacerbated by the need to move and live independently from family, many rural young people are forced to defer in order to earn the $18,525 required to be eligible to access youth allowance. As the rural and regional development committee noted, a worryingly high number of young people then don’t re-enrol in their study following this deferment.

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\(^5\) Rural and Regional Services and Development Committee. *op. cit.* See findings 6.25 and 6.26, pp. 207 – 208.

Research released last year by Naomi Godden (working with the Centre for Rural Social Research and Monash University Department of Social Work) explored in detail the relationship between youth allowance eligibility and young people’s access to tertiary education. The report, *Regional Young People and Youth Allowance: Access to Tertiary Education* took a qualitative approach, gathering information predominantly via interviews and focus groups in regional areas across Australia. The evidence revealed that:

The Youth Allowance system does not address the specific needs of regional Australians. The overwhelmingly negative and angry attitude towards Youth Allowance demonstrate that regional families feel unsupported and ignored, and are financially struggling. Participants (in Godden’s surveys and focus groups) express their concern that tertiary education is inaccessible for low and middle-income families from regional Australia. All participants believe that the system should support regional young people to participate in tertiary education.\(^7\)

Participants in Godden’s research made several recommendations regarding youth allowance eligibility, including:

- “That all regional young people are eligible for the full rate of Independent Youth Allowance if they must move away from home for tertiary education” – and;

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\(^7\) Godden, N. *Regional young People and Youth Allowance: Access to Tertiary Education*. p. 65.
• “That a Regional criterion for Youth allowance is developed, with eligibility based on distance between home and the young person’s chosen place of study.”

YACVic acknowledges that some changes have been made to the eligibility criteria for youth allowance for the children of families receiving “Exceptional Circumstances” (EC) Assistance from Centrelink due to the drought. When EC Assistance is received, ‘the Parental Income Family Asset and Family Actual Means Tests are waived. This means that...dependent children may be entitled to received the maximum rate of Youth Allowance or ABSTUDY while you are receiving EC Assistance.’ This is a welcomed shift to improve access for struggling families, however it does not go far enough to address the difficulties rural families typically face in supporting their children to access higher education - not simply those in exceptional circumstances.

Regardless of the method used to improve the eligibility criteria of youth allowance to improve it’s relevance to rural young people and their families, it is clear that without the eligibility criteria being modified, rural young people’s access to higher education is unlikely to be much improved.

The high costs of living away from home: disadvantage experienced by rural students and their families

Given the pressure on rural young people to defer in order to later afford to take up higher education placements, the current Centrelink payment structure does not adequately recognise the relative disadvantage experienced by young people in rural areas in accessing higher education. Typically, young people in rural areas have to move in order to access higher education opportunities, placing inescapable financial burden on families and young people. The Inquiry into Retaining Young People in Rural Towns and Communities found that both scholarship initiatives funded by the

8 Godden, N. op.cit. p. 66.
9 Centrelink brochure. ‘Drought Assistance for farmers and small businesses.’ p.3.
Commonwealth Government and ‘rent assistance’ schemes from Centrelink (available to some rural families from low socio-economic backgrounds in situations where a young person must live away from home to access education) do not provide enough assistance to ensure equality of opportunity to access education. The Inquiry found that:

Neither approach adequately addresses the following important issue: regardless of income or location any rural family with a student who is required to move away from home for study will incur accommodation and relocation costs. Extra costs for participation in higher education are not incurred by metropolitan families where the student is able to remain at home. The committee considers this to be a relative disadvantage experienced by rural families.\(^{10}\)

To this end, the Inquiry made Recommendation 34: ‘That the State Government urge the Commonwealth to introduce a variant of the Youth Allowance payment which provides the necessary funding to overcome the higher cost of university study for rural young people.’\(^{11}\)

It is relevant too that the Inquiry considers not only the financial strain of the current drought on rural families, exacerbating financial stress, but also the very high cost of living in Melbourne, particularly given the current stranglehold on the rental market. Figures published in the Age a month ago, revealed ‘that the vacancy rate across

\(^{10}\) Rural and Regional Services and Development Committee. *op.cit.* See finding 6.20 p. 206.

\(^{11}\) Rural and Regional Services and Development Committee. *op.cit.* p. 207.
Melbourne is 0.9%, a level not seen by the property industry since records began in the early 1980’s.\(^\text{12}\)

A case study received by YACVic outlines some of the cost considerations for rural students moving to take up a higher education placement:

“Mark’s deferral has been confirmed by Deakin.

He has deferred for two main reasons:

1) To have a break from study;

2) To spend a year sorting out financial issues and the cost of re-locating.

Mark has done some research into the cost and the figures he has received from Deakin indicate that the cost for a person living on Campus for the 38 weeks of the academic year will be $13,224, which includes $8399 for accommodation, catering (5 meals a week), utilities, activities fee, building maintenance levy, insurance on room contents, and telecommunications. There will be additional everyday living expenses such as entertainment and recreation, as well as the cost of the 16 meals per week not provided. \(^\text{13}\)

Having to move long distances away from home in order to access higher education creates a range of personal stresses (beyond just the financial) on young people and their families. For school leavers, facing a move to an unfamiliar and perhaps scary


\(^\text{13}\) Case study received from Linda Wilkinson, Executive Officer, Gippsland East Local Learning and Employment Network. Received via email correspondence 7/4/08.
place, to tackle the challenges of tertiary education without the immediate support of family and friends can further disadvantage rural students. This case study, supplied to us by a young YACVic member, paints a picture of the various and serious pressures and disadvantages that can be experienced by students from rural Victoria. This is Lauren’s story:

“I lived in Echuca throughout my schooling and have moved to Melbourne to study three and a half years ago now. Almost every semester I consider deferring my studies, and the issues are always monetary related. I work ridiculous hours in order to be able to stay in Melbourne, as I know many of my friends from Echuca do also, and I know that my studies (and a lot of my friends’) suffer due to our long working hours. I believe Victorian Parliament should be looking at ways to ease the financial stress places on the young adults that choose to relocate for education. A possible option could be further government funding given to the universities for the uni’s to give to rural students. Another possible option (although I believe the states don’t have any power in this matter) would be to force universities to have greater flexibility in regards to off-campus/distance learning. Many courses are not offered by distance education, specifically by the Group of Eight Universities.

I have also noticed a big difference in the way that rural students are prepared for tertiary education, as compared to those schooled somewhere in Melbourne (this may be a generalisation, but it’s what I have observed.’ Country students are often simply encouraged to get some form of tertiary education, regardless of what it may be. I was encouraged to go
to university, but my educators did not seem to have much of a suggestion as to what I should do. If a rural student simply gets into university it is seen as an achievement, regardless of the course they have gotten into – three years later with an Arts degree under their belt, they still have no idea what to do with themselves. I compare this with a lot of my Melbourne friends who were encouraged to do career oriented courses to suit their abilities, ie. commerce, accounting, law, medicine. They enter university knowing that they are studying to work for Ernst & Young, or the Royal Children’s Hospital. I suggest that the Victorian Government look into regulating the careers advisors in schools, encouraging individuals in the role to question why students wish to study what they are looking at and what they want to get from it. It is not good enough for schools to encourage going to uni simply for the sake of going to uni when some may be better placed in the workforce, or getting traineeships.

I would also like to add that VCAL has been a very positive introduction to the Campaspe Shire area and surroundings. The retention rate for students in our area is much higher with the option of VCAL than it was before it was implemented.

Finally, as you are most likely aware, the drought has had a massive impact on the lives of many rural students. I have seen quite a few of my friends defer their tertiary educations (whether they return will be a serious consideration) to return home to help out with family farming or produce businesses. I believe the government should again look into funding for rural students in drought affected areas in the hope they are able to complete
their studies in order to be able to return home and offer their education to their communities."

As Lauren has suggested, alongside the financial and personal disadvantages that rural students typically face in accessing higher education, many rural students do not aspire to engage with higher education as it may seem unrealistic for a host of reasons. Removing some of the financial and logistical barriers to accessing higher education can assist in raising the aspirations of rural young people to continue their studies. Opportunities also exist in mentoring initiatives that assist young people to access role models in others who are undertaking or have completed higher education.

**Impact of the Drought**

The impact of the drought is being experienced by young people in a range of ways including impeding their access to education and employment opportunities. In some cases it is impacting on young people’s mental and physical health and in further reducing their access to services. In 2006, YACVic and the North Central LLEN conducted a youth forum, ‘Talking about the big dry’ through which young people articulated their experiences of living with drought.

While rural young people do typically face disadvantage in accessing post-secondary education opportunities, as outlined earlier in this submission, the impact of severe drought has exacerbated some of those disadvantages and meant new challenges are being faced by young people and families in relation to education at a primary, secondary and post-secondary level.
The following is a summary of information that will appear in a literature review to be published in a yet to be released report by the Youth Affairs Council, *Talking about the big dry*: young people and the impact of drought.

**What does the research say about the impact of drought on education?**

The impacts of the drought on the economic and social well being of rural families and communities pose challenges for local schools and tertiary institutions. Reduced incomes mean that families cannot financially contribute to the school community as readily. Alston and Kent reported in a 2006 study *The impact of drought on Secondary Education access in Australia’s rural and remote areas*, that teachers had noted the impact of financial strain on families, with more students wearing uniforms for longer, more students asking for financial assistance for uniforms and less students attending excursions and extra curricular events.\(^\text{14}\)

Alston and Kent also suggest that young people are working long hours on farms assisting with labour tasks with some young people missing school as a result of their increased responsibility on farms. Alston and Kent point to the employment pressure on young people living in rural towns, noting that:

> Young people in towns are working part-time jobs, earning money that they report they need for their own education. Most rural young people encountered in this study are working long hours outside school either in paid work or farm work.\(^\text{15}\)

Research also shows that some secondary schools in rural and regional areas are experiencing a downturn in numbers. Alston and Kent report that retention rates are dropping for high schools with some young people reporting they might leave school to


\(^{15}\) ibid.
save their parents from additional financial stress.\textsuperscript{16} Clearly, once a young person disengages from the secondary education system they are unlikely to later access tertiary education. Alston and Kent outline that lower student retention rates have a range of flow on effects, such as impacting on teacher numbers, subjects offered, teachers teaching outside their discipline, difficulties for teachers accessing professional development, more students taking subjects by correspondence and problems for families funding extra-curricular activities.\textsuperscript{17} As many remote and some rural young people attend boarding schools, parents are reporting difficulties in paying boarding fees and a reduced capacity to make visits to their children because of financial responsibilities.\textsuperscript{18}

The disadvantages facing rural young people in accessing tertiary education have been highlighted in this submission. At a time of drought, these disadvantages are exacerbated. Evidence of the difficulties in accessing tertiary education experienced by rural young people at a time of drought prompted the University of Melbourne to introduce a Drought Recovery Scholarship Program in 2007. The University of Melbourne Dean of Land and Food Resources, Professor Ron Slocombe described the impact of drought on access to higher education and the lasting affect this may have on communities:

“Drought diminishes the capacity of regional students to invest in their tertiary education. A lack of suitably qualified professionals in regional communities will have substantial enduring negative impact long after the drought breaks, impoverishing regional communities for a generation.”\textsuperscript{19}

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{16} ibid.
\textsuperscript{17} ibid.
\textsuperscript{18} ibid.
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What have young people told us about the impact of drought on education?

Following the ‘Talking about the Big Dry’ youth forum, the North Central Local Learning and Employment network surveyed forum participants to delve further into their experiences of drought. On the topic of education, young people raised a range of concerns. The following summary of these issues will also appear in the *Talking about the Big Dry* forum report.

Young people surveyed commonly raised the issue of the impact of the drought on their access to, or experiences of, tertiary education. Whether young people interviewed were either already accessing tertiary education, or would be in the future, young people expressed feelings of guilt related to the costs of their education and their reduced availability to assist on the farm. Commonly, survey respondents described feeling ‘really bad’ about the financial pressure that was placed on their parents when they went to university. One young person described the impact these feelings of guilt were having on their sense of choice in higher education options:

“I still have a positive outlook on the future and going to university, however I will be conscious of the cost when applying for colleges.”

Another young person described the impact that drought was having on their choice of course at university:

“The drought has influenced my decisions in choosing my university course – the course is environment and people related.”

For some young people, drought has meant that university is not an option. One survey recipient noted that not everyone could afford to go off and study, although “some were lucky enough to get scholarships.”
A secondary school student raised their concern that the economic impact of the drought was restricting the availability of extra-curricular activities for all students, not just those whose families were experiencing financial strain. The student described their sense of frustration:

“Our school has definitely suffered. Most of the pupils come from farms, so the school is making a conscious effort to keep school trips affordable. This has restricted us at times, and I think it’s unfair.”

Evidently rural young people are aware of disadvantages that they face in relation to experiences of education, in the context of drought.

**Skills shortage**

Young people’s access to higher education has implications for the current skills shortage. The Minister for Skills, Jacinta Allan, has been vocal in her criticism of the shortfalls in numbers of HECS-funded University places for Victorian students and the impact that this will have on industries experiencing a shortage of skilled employees. On the issue of young people missing out on tertiary placements, Minister Allan was quoted last year to say:

“It is a blow for Victorian business and industry, who won’t get the skilled workers needed to fill thousands of vacancy jobs requiring tertiary graduate workers.”

Not only do young people need to access higher education opportunities in order to fill shortages in areas of skilled employment, but in some cases young people also need

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encouragement to pursue higher education where they may already have employment. Given the skills shortages, young people who are forced to defer and enter the workforce, may find themselves enticed to stay in employment roles rather than return to study.

The Inquiry into Retaining Young People in Rural Towns and Communities provides a break-down of the reported skills shortages in 2005 for Victorian Regions. This reveals that there are skills shortages in all regions in areas of employment that are particularly accessible to school leavers. These include areas such as ‘Retail Trade’ (listed for the Bendigo, Mildura and Wimmera regions), ‘Manufacturing’ (listed for the Mildura, Wimmera Grampians, Geelong and Colac and Ballarat Regions) and ‘Accommodation, Cafes and Restaurants’ (listed for the Bendigo and Ballarat regions).21

It is important that there are opportunities for young people who may fill these employment roles to be encouraged to return to further study when appropriate. Feedback from the South Gippsland/Bass Coast Local Learning and Employment Network describes the situation in their region:

“the building and construction industry is strong in the region particularly in Bass Coast as a consequence of its continuing high population growth rate. Consequently many young people have available to them locally good secure employment options that are an attractive alternative to higher education. Employers of and organisations training these young people should be assisted in encouraging and providing opportunities for

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21 Rural and Regional Services and Development Committee. _op.cit_ See Appendix Six, pp.314 – 316.
the young people to pursue higher
education.”

Transport disadvantage

Rural young people’s access to higher education is also made difficult due to the transport
disadvantage they face living in poorly serviced communities. Where a university, TaFE or
alternative education provider may be located in a regional area, poor public transport
networks still hinder young people’s access to those education options.

YACVic participates in the Transport Action Victoria Network convened by VCOSS and as
such will defer to VCOSS’s submission to this inquiry in relation to recommendations made
to improve young people’s access to transport options in rural Victoria.

Summary of key recommendations

1. YACVic recommends that the inquiry consider the recommendations previously
   made by the Rural and Regional Services and Development Committee inquiry into
   Retaining Young People in Rural Towns and Communities relating to education. Of
   particular relevance to the issues raised in this submission is Recommendation 34:
   ‘That the State Government urge the Commonwealth to introduce a variant of Youth
   Allowance payment which provides the necessary funding to overcome the high
   cost of university study for rural young people.’

2. That the Inquiry considers the range of alternative support options (such as
   investment in mentoring opportunities or improved support for students to prepare
   for higher education) to better assist those young people who move to urban areas
   for the purposes of study.

22 Written correspondence from David Roche of the South Gippsland/Bass Coast Local Learning and
   Employment Network, provided via email to YACVic 27/3/08.
3. That the Inquiry make recommendations to strengthen the capacity of employers of rural young people to assist and encourage those young people to access higher education training.

4. That the Inquiry make recommendations to improve young people’s access to transport in rural and regional areas in order to engage in post-secondary education opportunities. YACVic endorses the recommendations made in the submission by VCOSS to this Inquiry, including the need to improve tertiary students access to ‘school bus’ services.