

Provision and accessibility

Whilst regional universities and regional campuses do not and cannot solve all the problems with access and participation, they are uniquely placed to give many students an opportunity that would otherwise not be available to them. In doing so they also offer a number of important spin-offs.⁶³⁵

One of the most obvious differences between metropolitan, outer urban and regional areas with respect to higher education lies in the level of local provision. At the same time as examining the impact of provision on participation, the Committee also sought to gain an understanding of the role of higher education providers within their communities. In investigating each of these themes, the Committee considered ways in which higher education is delivered and accessed, particularly in regional areas. Traditional models of on-campus and distance education are today complemented by other approaches which incorporate elements of both on-campus and off-campus study, and which often rely on collaboration between communities, universities and other education and training providers. Participants in the Committee's inquiry discussed the quality, cost effectiveness and suitability of these various approaches to higher education provision.

University campuses

Although there is increasing flexibility and diversity in the ways in which a student can undertake higher education, the traditional experience of on-campus study remains the most common mode of participation. University campuses vary in quality and accessibility, but share some key characteristics. Campuses are physical locations for course delivery and, as one participant suggested, may be defined by the 'ongoing presence of some senior academic leaders ... and associated infrastructure'.⁶³⁶ Australian Government funding guidelines for regional university campuses specify that to be considered a campus, a site must have regular face-to-face teaching, and that entire courses must be delivered from the location.⁶³⁷ Research is another defining characteristic of a university, although the breadth and intensity of research activity varies across campuses.

⁶³⁵ Professor R. Chambers, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Academic, Charles Sturt University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Benalla, 3 March 2009, 47.

⁶³⁶ Mr L. Money, Shelley (Western Australia), Written Submission, August 2008, 2.

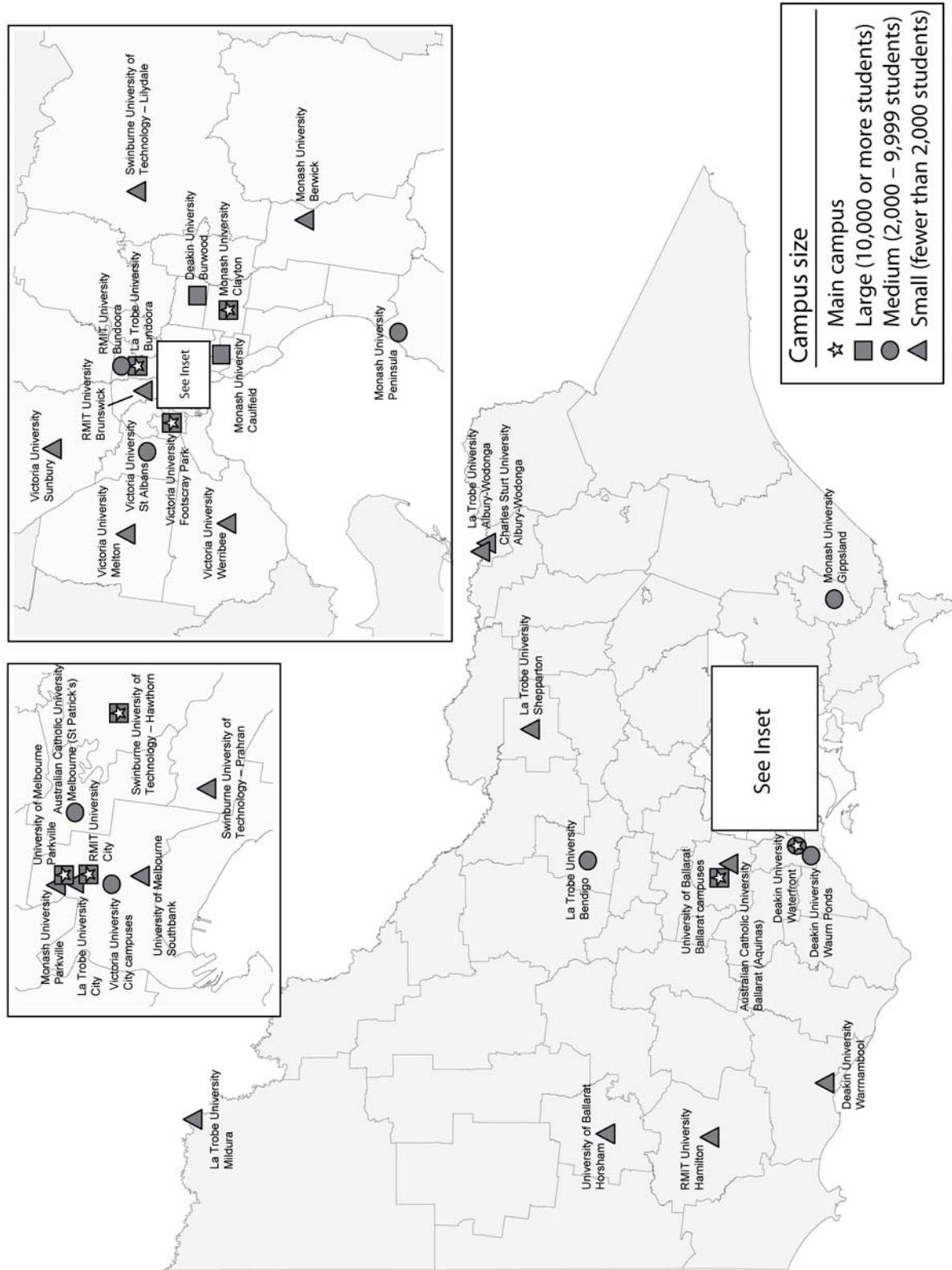
⁶³⁷ *Commonwealth Grant Scheme Guidelines No. 7*, s. 4.5.1.

While university campuses share some defining characteristics, they can differ substantially. In Victoria, university campuses vary dramatically in size, from fewer than 1,000 students at small campuses, through to many thousands at the largest. Small university campuses offer a narrower range of courses, and may specialise in only one discipline. At the same time, the mode of delivery can differ between campuses, with some smaller regional campuses employing what is termed 'blended learning': a combination of face-to-face and online or distance learning. Within the blended learning category, the balance between face-to-face and online or distance delivery can also vary. Campuses that are very small and that employ blended learning are sometimes designated as 'university centres' (which are discussed later in the chapter). Finally, the nature and scale of facilities and services also differs across campuses. Students enjoy different levels of access to educational facilities such as libraries, computers and learning spaces, and the provision of academic and welfare services and extra-curricular activities varies.

Geographical distribution of university campuses in Victoria

In Victoria, as in other Australian jurisdictions, higher education campuses are concentrated in metropolitan areas. Figure 6.1 shows that of the eight Victorian universities, six have their Vice-Chancellery at a main campus located in Melbourne. In addition, the Australian Catholic University has two campuses in Victoria, with the larger of these located in inner Melbourne.

Figure 6.1: Distribution of university campuses in Victoria, showing campus size (2009)



Note: Campus size based on analysis of student numbers on university websites and current annual reports, July 2009. Student numbers reflect the total head count of students participating in higher education courses delivered wholly at the campus, including domestic, international, full-time and part-time students. TAFE students enrolled at dual-sector campuses are not reflected in the analysis.

Source: Education and Training Committee, July 2009.

Within Melbourne, higher education campuses are largely situated in relatively inner suburbs. At present, higher education institutions have only six campuses located in the growing interface municipalities on Melbourne's outskirts. Each of these is a small or medium-sized campus, and some, such as Monash University's Peninsula campus, are specialised. Victoria University's small outer urban campuses at Melton and Sunbury will cease enrolments from 2010, reducing the number of campuses in interface areas to four.

Campuses are also located in large regional centres with sufficient population to sustain a campus. The major regional cities of Geelong and Ballarat host the main campuses of Deakin University and the University of Ballarat, respectively. Campuses in less populous regional cities typically have fewer students and offer a less extensive range of courses.

With only two regionally-based universities, provision of higher education in regional Victoria most commonly takes the form of subsidiary campuses of Melbourne-based institutions. La Trobe University, based in Bundoora in Melbourne, is a major regional provider with campuses in Bendigo, Wodonga, Mildura and Shepparton. Rural and regional engagement is also a core commitment of Deakin University, which operates a small campus at Warrnambool on Victoria's south-west coast. Monash University has a regional campus at Churchill in Gippsland in addition to its two outer urban campuses, Peninsula and Berwick. The Australian Catholic University also has a small campus in Ballarat, while Charles Sturt University, with a campus in Albury on the New South Wales border, is also a significant provider to students from Victoria's north-east.

Regional university campuses and regional development

Regional universities and campuses are highly valued by their host communities. Despite the substantial challenges these institutions face, they are seen as playing a vital regional development role, as well as promoting participation in higher education by providing local study opportunities.

Economic growth and human capital

Universities are major contributors to local economies and are an important force in regional development. Regional universities and campuses provide employment and contribute to the local economy in their regions. Australian government figures show that in 2003, regional universities generated \$2,871 million in revenue, provided approximately 22,000 full-time equivalent jobs, and spent \$1,574 million on wages and related costs.⁶³⁸ A recent study by the Western Research Institute at Charles Sturt University found that Deakin University's Warrnambool campus contributed \$32 million to the regional economy, generating \$13 million in household income (2.5% of total household income for the region) and accounting for 3.6 per cent of gross regional product.⁶³⁹ Similar research on the economic impact of the University of Ballarat found that when flow-on effects were taken into account, the university generated the equivalent of 11.8 per cent gross regional product and 8.5 per cent of employment in Ballarat.⁶⁴⁰

⁶³⁸ National Tertiary Education Union (Victorian Division), Written Submission, March 2008, 3.

⁶³⁹ Warrnambool City Council, Written Submission, March 2008, 6.

⁶⁴⁰ Western Research Institute, *Economic Impact of the University of Ballarat* (Bathurst: Western Research Institute, 2007), 4.

Additionally, in a submission to the Review of Australian Higher Education, the Geraldton University Access Group made interesting observations regarding the economic impact of students leaving their community in order to undertake higher education. It noted that if the current equivalent full-time students studying at the Geraldton Universities Centre were to relocate to Perth, this would represent a direct leakage of around \$2 million annually from the local economy. The impact is even more significant if indirect (multiplier) impacts are considered.⁶⁴¹ Similar observations were made in submissions to the inquiry.⁶⁴² The Committee notes these concerns as an argument for sustaining rural and regional university campuses.

As well as these direct economic benefits, by providing education, universities play an important role in the development of human capital in regional areas. The movement of people from regional Victoria to Melbourne to participate in higher education, while positive, contributes to the loss of human capital in regional areas.⁶⁴³ In contrast, regional universities and campuses offer opportunities for people to develop their skills and knowledge without leaving the local community. Graduates who have been educated at a regional university tend to remain in regional Victoria for work, contributing their valuable skills to regional communities.⁶⁴⁴ Research at the University of Ballarat has found that while less than a quarter of regional students who have moved to a metropolitan area for study return, 79 per cent of those who study in a regional area stay in a regional area after graduation.⁶⁴⁵ At some regional campuses this figure is even higher. Data from the Graduate Destination Survey shows that in 2007, almost 90 per cent of graduates from the La Trobe University Mildura campus were employed in regional Victoria.⁶⁴⁶

There is also evidence that metropolitan students who have moved to a regional area for study are more likely to remain there upon completion of their studies. Half of those who move from Melbourne to study at the University of Ballarat remain in a regional area for their initial graduate employment.⁶⁴⁷ At Charles Sturt University, more graduates from the Bachelor of Pharmacy are employed regionally than were originally from a regional area.⁶⁴⁸ Similarly, from the first three graduate cohorts of pharmacy students at La Trobe University's Bendigo campus, all students from regional home postcodes and more than half who had relocated from a metropolitan area sought regional employment.⁶⁴⁹ The university attributes these results in part to efforts to shape courses around local needs and to ensure that students are professionally networked during their studies.⁶⁵⁰ Warrnambool City Council also noted that employers in Warrnambool prefer to hire local graduates rather than applicants from Melbourne, who are perceived as being less likely to remain over a longer period.⁶⁵¹

⁶⁴¹ Geraldton University Access Group, *Submission to the Review of Australian Higher Education* (Canberra: Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2008), 5.

⁶⁴² For example, Southern Grampians Youth Network, Written Submission, April 2008, 2; Centre for Regional Development, Swinburne University of Technology, Appendix C to Written Submission, March 2008, 11.

⁶⁴³ Southern Grampians Youth Network, Written Submission, April 2008, 3.

⁶⁴⁴ National Tertiary Education Union (Victorian Division), Written Submission, March 2008, 2; Mr A. Paton, Grants/Business Development Officer, City Growth Directorate, Warrnambool City Council, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Colac, 29 April 2008, 8; Professor W. Brabham, Director, Institute of Koorie Education, Deakin University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Colac, 29 April 2008, 59.

⁶⁴⁵ Gannawarra Shire Council, Written Submission, March 2008, 9.

⁶⁴⁶ La Trobe University, Written Submission, March 2008, 10–11.

⁶⁴⁷ Professor D. Battersby, Vice-Chancellor, University of Ballarat, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 30 March 2009, 26–27.

⁶⁴⁸ National Rural Health Alliance, Written Submission, February 2008, 6.

⁶⁴⁹ La Trobe University, Written Submission, March 2008, 11.

⁶⁵⁰ *ibid.*

⁶⁵¹ Warrnambool City Council, Written Submission, March 2008, 4.

Research

In addition to their role in educating professionals, regional universities can also contribute to regional development and wider knowledge through research activities. In regional settings, research is often focused on local issues in areas such as public health, environmental management, agriculture and tourism.⁶⁵² It is also frequently undertaken in partnership with community organisations, government and industry.⁶⁵³ Dr Steve McEachern, Representative, National Tertiary Education Union (Victorian Division), contrasted his experiences as a researcher in metropolitan and regional contexts:

It was my experience certainly ... I never went outside the institution, let alone outside into the community in the metropolitan institutions ... In a regional campus, doing similar sorts of research, my engagement with the community at large is almost obligatory. There is an expectation on staff, which is a very enjoyable part of the process.⁶⁵⁴

The research conducted at regional universities and applied to local issues often has additional national and international significance.⁶⁵⁵ Warrnambool City Council suggested that there is a need for greater coordination of research focused on growth and development in regional Victoria, and argued that the Victorian Government could play a role by establishing a regional campus heads forum that could explore common issues, share resources, and collaborate in finding solutions to problems.⁶⁵⁶ The Committee heard that some collaboration of this nature is already occurring. For example, the University of Ballarat and Deakin University have identified key areas of research considered important to regional Victoria, each contributing to a funding pool for collaborative research projects.⁶⁵⁷

Research is a crucial activity for Australian universities, and current National Protocols for Higher Education Approval Processes require that universities carry out research in at least three broad fields, and in all broad fields in which PhDs and research masters degrees are offered. Inquiry participants from the higher education sector were generally of the view that some of this research activity should take place at regional campuses. Dr Kerry Ferguson, Pro Vice-Chancellor, Equity and Student Services, La Trobe University, told the Committee:

... everyone would agree that we need research [at regional campuses]. That research does not have to be across the gamut of the research that the organisation provides, but there are unique opportunities in the regional areas for research ... I think that is really important because otherwise we are talking about a location for delivery of a program, and it is not really ... a university; it is not a campus.⁶⁵⁸

At the same time, the Committee heard that universities in both regional and interface areas can experience difficulty in attracting appropriately qualified research staff.⁶⁵⁹ Professor Elizabeth Harman, Vice-Chancellor, Victoria University, described how an attempt to set up

⁶⁵² Warrnambool City Council, Written Submission, March 2008, 4, 6; Mr K. Farrell, Executive Director, Mildura Campus, La Trobe University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Robinvale, 2 June 2008, 48; Mr L. Money, Shelley (Western Australia), Written Submission, August 2008, 10.

⁶⁵³ Ms R. May, Industrial Officer, National Tertiary Education Union (Victorian Division), Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 14 April 2008, 24; Dr K. Ferguson, Pro Vice-Chancellor, Equity and Student Services, La Trobe University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 30 March 2009, 24.

⁶⁵⁴ Dr S. McEachern, Representative, National Tertiary Education Union (Victorian Division), Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 14 April 2008, 25.

⁶⁵⁵ National Tertiary Education Union (Victorian Division), Written Submission, March 2008, 3.

⁶⁵⁶ Warrnambool City Council, Written Submission, March 2008, 7–8.

⁶⁵⁷ Professor D. Battersby, Vice-Chancellor, University of Ballarat, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 30 March 2009, 24.

⁶⁵⁸ Dr K. Ferguson, Pro Vice-Chancellor, Equity and Student Services, La Trobe University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 30 March 2009, 24.

⁶⁵⁹ Professor S. Walker, Vice-Chancellor, Deakin University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 30 March 2009, 24–25; Professor K. Lipson, Dean, Faculty of Higher Education, Lilydale Campus, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Lilydale, 17 July 2008, 18; Professor E. Harman, Vice-Chancellor, Victoria University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 30 March 2009, 25.

a biomedical research centre at Werribee in Melbourne's outer west failed because researchers had been unwilling to move to the area.⁶⁶⁰ Professor Sally Walker, Vice-Chancellor, Deakin University, noted that while attracting research staff to regional campuses is 'an issue', once a critical mass of researchers is established it becomes possible to recruit high quality staff nationally and internationally.⁶⁶¹

The Committee notes that following the 2008 Review of the National Innovation System, the Australian Government has announced reforms to policy and funding for research at public universities. In tandem with increased research funding, the Australian Government will seek to promote further specialisation, networking and collaboration, with the aim of achieving critical mass and excellence in research. As one component of this, a new Collaborative Research Networks Scheme will be established to encourage smaller, regional and less research intensive universities to collaborate with other institutions to increase their research capacity:

Researchers and research teams will be encouraged to organise themselves into hubs and spokes, with resources concentrated in the most appropriate research centres and departments (the hubs), where they can be accessed by scholars around the country (the spokes).⁶⁶²

The Committee sees research as a vitally important role of universities wherever they operate, and supports these moves to strengthen research at regional and small universities.

Social and cultural development

As well as being important drivers of economic wellbeing, regional universities and campuses, along with other tertiary institutions, contribute to social and cultural development in their communities.⁶⁶³ In regional areas, university campuses can provide the community with access to sporting, cultural and information and communications technology (ICT) facilities that they might not otherwise enjoy, such as fitness centres, libraries and videoconferencing equipment.⁶⁶⁴ Through their teaching and learning, the presence of a vibrant student population, and their wider activities, regional universities also help to promote a culture of learning.⁶⁶⁵ All of these features mean that regional campuses add to the amenity of their communities. Several local government participants in the inquiry argued that a local university presence is an important drawcard that can help regional communities to attract and retain residents.⁶⁶⁶

⁶⁶⁰ Professor E. Harman, Vice-Chancellor, Victoria University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 30 March 2009, 25.

⁶⁶¹ Professor S. Walker, Vice-Chancellor, Deakin University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 30 March 2009, 24.

⁶⁶² Australian Government, *Powering Ideas: An Innovation Agenda for the 21st Century* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2009), 34.

⁶⁶³ National Tertiary Education Union (Victorian Division), Written Submission, March 2008, 3; Deakin University, Written Submission, March 2008, 13; Warrnambool City Council, Written Submission, March 2008, 6; South West Institute of TAFE, Written Submission, April 2008, 2.

⁶⁶⁴ Centre for Regional Development, Swinburne University of Technology, Written Submission, March 2008, 9; Dr L. Wheeler, Head, Learning Community Partnerships, RMIT University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Hamilton, 28 April 2008, 48; La Trobe University, Written Submission, March 2008, 13; Warrnambool City Council, Written Submission, March 2008, 7.

⁶⁶⁵ South East LLEN, Written Submission, May 2008, 3; Ms R. May, Industrial Officer, National Tertiary Education Union (Victorian Division), Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 14 April 2008, 24.

⁶⁶⁶ For example, Warrnambool City Council, Written Submission, March 2008, 4–5; Bass Coast Shire Council, Appendix to Written Submission, March 2008, 17; Ararat Rural City, Written Submission, March 2008, 3; Central Goldfields Shire Council, Written Submission, March 2008, 10.

The influence of campus location on participation

An important question that the Committee sought to address is whether, and to what extent, local higher education provision can lift participation rates. Inquiry participants expressed a range of views on this topic, which is also the theme of a body of Australian research.

While support for greater provision of higher education campuses or courses in regional Victoria was a recurrent theme in the inquiry, some researchers and university representatives argued that increased provision would not substantially lift participation rates.⁶⁶⁷ Dr Hamish Coates, Principal Research Fellow, Australian Council for Educational Research, summarised the existing research findings:

Access to university for students in regional and remote areas appears to be a mix of socioeconomic status, rurality and proximity to a campus, but we know that for various reasons proximity to a campus may not be a relevant consideration. The campus may not be in an institution the student wants to attend, or it may not offer the course mix that the student is interested in pursuing.⁶⁶⁸

Professor Richard Larkins, Chair, Universities Australia and then Vice-Chancellor, Monash University, told the Committee that regional campuses make a vital contribution to their communities and are very important for some regional students.⁶⁶⁹ Nevertheless, in terms of participation rates, Professor Larkins suggested that additional places at metropolitan universities, combined with favourable admissions processes, could 'compensate to a significant extent for moving [university places] out of regional locations'.⁶⁷⁰

Attracting local students

While local delivery of higher education helps to improve human capital in regional areas, regional university campuses and sites can experience difficulty in attracting sufficient students. Because the population catchment at regional campuses is generally small, regional universities operate in thin markets. As well as beginning with a smaller pool of potential students in their catchment areas, regional universities must also compete for local students in a highly competitive market that includes both metropolitan universities and other regional campuses. In this market, regional universities may be disadvantaged by their narrower range of courses and perceptions of lower quality or status.

The Committee heard that while regional and outer urban universities are frequently the largest single provider of higher education to students from the local area, the majority of local students may nevertheless choose to study elsewhere. In 2007, La Trobe University's regional campuses attracted between 40.0 and 51.2 per cent of enrolments from the local area,⁶⁷¹ while Deakin University's campus in Warrnambool enrolled 30 per cent of commencing students from the Western District.⁶⁷² Similarly, the Committee heard that Monash University at its Gippsland campus has found that attracting students from the region to study locally has been challenging.⁶⁷³

⁶⁶⁷ Dr H. Coates, Principal Research Fellow, Australian Council for Educational Research, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 3 March 2008, 3; Professor R. James, Director, Centre for the Study of Higher Education, The University of Melbourne, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 3 March 2008, 13–14; Professor R. Larkins, Chair, Universities Australia, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 3 March 2008, 19–21.

⁶⁶⁸ Dr H. Coates, Principal Research Fellow, Australian Council for Educational Research, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 3 March 2008, 3.

⁶⁶⁹ Professor R. Larkins, Chair, Universities Australia, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 3 March 2008, 25.

⁶⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁶⁷¹ La Trobe University, Written Submission, March 2008, 5.

⁶⁷² Warrnambool City Council, Written Submission, March 2008, 2–3.

⁶⁷³ Associate Professor H. Ballis, Acting Pro Vice-Chancellor, Gippsland Campus, Monash University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Churchill, 19 May 2008, 26.

Smaller campuses in interface areas are in a similar situation with regard to attracting students. Related to these pressures, in late 2008, Victoria University announced the closure of two of its 11 campuses. With approximately 1,550 higher education and TAFE students, the Sunbury campus offered courses in nursing, business and performance studies. The smaller Melton campus had approximately 850 students, and most were enrolled in education courses. These two small campuses attracted just five per cent of local students going on to higher education. Twenty-five per cent of higher education students attended a different campus of Victoria University, while the remaining 70 per cent enrolled at another higher education institution. Professor Elizabeth Harman, Vice-Chancellor, Victoria University, told the Committee that taking into account projected population growth and an increased participation rate, the campuses 'still look like they will be no larger than a high school' by 2031.⁶⁷⁴ Professor Harman advised that resources would be better used on quality teaching, facilities and student support across the university, rather than the maintenance of multiple small campuses.⁶⁷⁵

The Committee agrees that higher education should be planned to ensure that available resources are used efficiently to provide high quality participation opportunities. Nevertheless, the Committee notes that substantial public resources are often invested for the specific purpose of providing educational opportunities in an area. In such circumstances, the Committee sees disinvestment on the part of universities as problematic, and believes that existing infrastructure should remain available for public educational use.

A further challenge for many regional universities is that they operate in areas with a declining youth population. This point was highlighted by the Review of Australian Higher Education, which provided projections suggesting that the population of 15- to 24-year-olds outside of capital cities in Australia (including in Victoria) is likely to decline slightly over the coming decade.⁶⁷⁶ A review of La Trobe University's regional provision in 2007 found that of its four regional campuses, only the Bendigo campus was in a catchment likely to experience population growth in target age brackets.⁶⁷⁷ It is worth noting here that while there are a number of parallels between regional and small interface campuses, most of the growth in Victoria's urban youth population is occurring at Melbourne's outskirts, meaning that student demand is unlikely to fall in these areas.

Finally, the Committee heard that limited public transport options can also hinder higher education participation in rural and regional Victoria. Many participants from non-metropolitan areas highlighted the lack of public transport connecting regional centres to one another, and to smaller rural communities.⁶⁷⁸ The Committee heard that where such services exist, they are often irregular, and may not run each day or at appropriate or peak times.⁶⁷⁹ A lack of connecting services can mean that students may need to take a taxi to campus, or that the university itself has to arrange transport services. Inadequate public

⁶⁷⁴ Professor E. Harman, Vice-Chancellor, Victoria University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 30 March 2009, 4.

⁶⁷⁵ *ibid.*

⁶⁷⁶ Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, *Review of Australian Higher Education: Final Report* (Canberra: DEEWR, 2008), 109.

⁶⁷⁷ National Tertiary Education Union (Victorian Division), Written Submission, March 2008, 7.

⁶⁷⁸ For example, Horsham Rural City Council, Written Submission, March 2008, 2; Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals, Written Submission, March 2008, 7; Mr J. and Mrs T. Wilson-Brown, Parents, Wulgulmerang, Written Submission, March 2008, 1; Rural City of Wangaratta, Written Submission, May 2008, 2; Mr G. Stone, Interim Executive Officer, Northern Mallee LLEN, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Ouyen, 3 June 2008, 35.

⁶⁷⁹ Equity and Access Unit, La Trobe University, Written Submission, April 2008, 8; Wellington Shire Council, Appendix to Written Submission, March 2008, 6; Mrs K. Hunt, Parent, Geelong West, Written Submission, April 2008, 1; Rural City of Wangaratta, Written Submission, May 2008, 2; Cr C. Smith, Mayor, Colac Otway Shire Council, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Colac, 29 April 2008, 4; Ms L. Toddun, Facilitator, Glenelg Local Community Partnership, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Hamilton, 28 April 2008, 35.

transport may instead make car ownership a necessity for many non-metropolitan students.⁶⁸⁰ During public hearings in Gippsland, the Committee heard that even within the La Trobe Valley, access to the Monash University campus is difficult and time consuming, as the public transport system is instead 'geared around commuting to Melbourne'.⁶⁸¹ The Committee heard that students travelling short distances from Morwell and Traralgon to the Churchill campus face lengthy travel times, and may be unable to reach campus in time for morning classes.⁶⁸²

Inquiry participants noted that transport difficulties also often impact on TAFE students and apprentices in non-metropolitan areas.⁶⁸³ A number of participants therefore argued that the Victorian Government should improve public transport in regional cities with universities, and to regional centres from nearby towns.⁶⁸⁴ Others argued that access to education and training institutions should be a priority consideration in public transport planning in non-metropolitan areas.⁶⁸⁵ The Committee believes that the Victorian Government should review public transport provision in non-metropolitan Victoria, with a view to improving access to education and training facilities.

Spatial patterns of enrolment

While no university campus, whether metropolitan or non-metropolitan, captures all university students from its catchment area, the Committee found that there is a relationship between where students study and where they live. The Committee's analysis of data from the Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre (VTAC) shows that a majority of higher education students from non-metropolitan home locations enrol at a regional university campus.

Table 6.1 shows the proportion of 2007 school leavers enrolling at metropolitan and regional campuses, by home location. A slight majority (51.2%) of non-metropolitan school leavers enrolling in a university course chose a regional university campus, either in their local area or in another regional location. In addition, 2.5 per cent of metropolitan school leavers and 6.3 per cent of those from interface areas enrolled at a regional institution.

Table 6.1: School leaver university enrolments at metropolitan and regional campuses, by home location (%) (2007–08)

Home location	Metropolitan campus enrolments	Regional campus enrolments
Metropolitan	97.5	2.5
Interface	93.7	6.3
Non-metropolitan	48.8	51.2
All Victoria	88.6	11.4

Source: Education and Training Committee analysis of 2007–08 VTAC data, May 2009.

⁶⁸⁰ Rural City of Wangaratta, Written Submission, May 2008, 2; Mr G. Stone, Interim Executive Officer, Northern Mallee LLEN, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Ouyen, 3 June 2008, 35.

⁶⁸¹ Mr R. Juratowitch, Campus Principal, Kurnai College, Gippsland Education Precinct, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Churchill, 19 May 2008, 3.

⁶⁸² Ms A. Kilby, Student Advocate and Support Coordinator, Monash University Gippsland Student Union, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Churchill, 19 May 2008, 68.

⁶⁸³ WORKCO Limited, Written Submission, May 2008, 1–2; Ms C. Torpey, Careers Coordinator, Ouyen Secondary College, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Ouyen, 3 June 2008, 6; Bendigo Regional Institute of TAFE, Written Submission, March 2008, 2–4; Gordon Institute of TAFE, Written Submission, April 2008, 8.

⁶⁸⁴ For example, Committee for Ballarat, Written Submission, March 2008, 1; Wellington Shire Council, Appendix to Written Submission, March 2008, 6; Youth Affairs Council of Victoria, Written Submission, April 2008, 23; South West LLEN, Written Submission, April 2008, 10; North Central LLEN, Written Submission, May 2008, 89; Ms M. Kirsopp, Parent, Haven, Written Submission, May 2008, 5; Mr S. Kozlowski, Chief Executive Officer, East Gippsland Shire Council, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Bairnsdale, 20 May 2008, 2.

⁶⁸⁵ Mr D. Roche, Executive Officer, South Gippsland and Bass Coast LLEN, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Churchill, 19 May 2008, 10; Mr J. and Mrs T. Wilson-Brown, Parents, Wulgulmerang, Written Submission, March 2008, 2.

Commencing students who were not current school leavers were even more likely to choose a regional study location. Table 6.2 reveals that 62.0 per cent of non-school leaver university students from non-metropolitan Victoria chose a regional campus location, while only 38.0 per cent chose to attend a metropolitan university campus. Interestingly, non-school leaver commencing students from metropolitan and interface home locations were also more likely than school leavers from these areas to enrol at a regional campus. The Committee found the same patterns in 2005–06 and 2006–07.

Table 6.2: Victorian non-school leaver university enrolments at metropolitan and regional campuses, by home location (%) (2007–08)

Home location	Metropolitan campus enrolments	Regional campus enrolments
Metropolitan	96.8	3.2
Interface	93.0	7.0
Non-metropolitan	38.0	62.0
All Victoria	86.1	13.9

Source: Education and Training Committee analysis of 2007–08 VTAC data, May 2009.

There is also a relationship between home location and campus choice within metropolitan areas. A recent study examined enrolment patterns in Melbourne and its outer suburbs using VTAC data on government school students who completed year 12 in 2004. The study found that school leavers from areas surrounding major campuses in Melbourne's east, north and west had a strong tendency to enrol at their local campus. Smaller campuses in Melbourne's outer east and south also attracted a larger share of enrolments from their regions, although the effect was less marked. The study concluded that 'there are strong spatial patterns in university attendance within the suburban landscape of Melbourne'.⁶⁸⁶

Proximity and location as an influence on campus choice

Throughout the inquiry, the Committee heard from a number of young people from regional Victoria who were keen to relocate to Melbourne or another large metropolitan area for study. Young people who were eager to move to the city for university spoke about their desire to 'get out of the country' and experience something different.⁶⁸⁷ These young people, who had typically already spent time in the larger cities, were attracted to the idea of living independently, experiencing the diversity of the metropolitan setting, and enjoying a city lifestyle.⁶⁸⁸ Mr Patrick Haylock, a student from Bairnsdale, argued that therefore, regional universities would not be attractive to all students:

Bringing the university to the country would make the transition more easy, but it would take away a bit of the university glamour that actually gets students to go there in the first place, and I think you would still find that lots of students would go to the cities and have a lot of trouble getting the universities to be attractive here in the first place. For some courses especially.⁶⁸⁹

⁶⁸⁶ Daniel Edwards, 'Keeping it local: geographical patterns of university attendance,' *Australian Universities Review* 51, no. 1 (2009): 61.

⁶⁸⁷ Ms C. Barker, Year 11 Student, Ouyen Secondary College, Written Submission, April 2008, 1; Ms H. Barry, School Captain and Year 12 Student, Bairnsdale Secondary College, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Bairnsdale, 20 May 2008, 50.

⁶⁸⁸ Ms H. Barry, School Captain and Year 12 Student, Bairnsdale Secondary College, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Bairnsdale, 20 May 2008, 50; Ms E. McKenzie, Year 12 Student, Bairnsdale Secondary College, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Bairnsdale, 20 May 2008, 50; Ms J. Marks, Year 11 Student, Ouyen Secondary College, Written Submission, April 2008, 1.

⁶⁸⁹ Mr P. Haylock, Deferred Student, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Bairnsdale, 20 May 2008, 50.

The Committee acknowledges that many young people from rural and regional areas want to experience the 'bright lights' of the city and would prefer to relocate, even where local higher education options are available.

At the same time, contributions to the inquiry from students and prospective students in non-metropolitan Victoria indicate that proximity to a local campus, or the preference to study in a regional setting, is an important consideration for many.⁶⁹⁰ In 2004 and 2005, the Northern Mallee LLEN surveyed senior secondary students in Victoria's north-west about their preferred study locations. While approximately half of respondents (49%) wanted to move away for university, 33 per cent said they would prefer to stay in the region to study, while a further 18 per cent reported wanting to complete the first year of study locally.⁶⁹¹

In addition, the Committee heard that some students from rural areas have a preference for relocating to a regional university campus rather than a metropolitan one.⁶⁹² This is also clear from the Committee's analysis of VTAC data. Of 2006 school leavers, the Committee found that most university applicants from non-metropolitan areas applied to both metropolitan and non-metropolitan campuses (55.7%), and a substantial proportion (19.8%) applied only for courses at regional campuses.⁶⁹³

Analysis of the data at a more local level shows that some regions with high rates of application to regional campuses do not have local higher education options. For example, in the Wimmera region, encompassing the local areas of Hindmarsh, Horsham, Northern Grampians, West Wimmera and Yarriambiack, 34.3 per cent of applicants applied only to regional campuses, with a further 55.3 per cent applying to both metropolitan and regional campuses.⁶⁹⁴ This indicates that even when relocation is inevitable, a substantial proportion of students from regional areas has a preference for studying in a regional location.

The Committee heard many reasons why some rural students prefer not to move to a metropolitan location. Factors include the availability of accommodation, lower cost of living, closer access to home, and greater comfort in the regional university environment and culture.⁶⁹⁵ Mr Axil Lonergan, Year 11 Student, Ouyen Secondary College and Kwong Lee Dow Young Scholar, said in a written submission that the idea of attending university in Melbourne was 'too daunting at this stage'. Instead, Mr Lonergan was considering regional universities that were less distant and where accommodation was more affordable.⁶⁹⁶

Research indicates that the proximity of university campuses is one influence on where students choose to study. One study surveyed a sample of 538 undergraduate university applicants regarding the key influences on their choice of preferred university. The research found that gaining entry to a particular field of study and the particular course offered by the university were the dominant considerations influencing choice of institution. Nevertheless, 53 per cent of school leaver applicants and 57 per cent of mature age applicants reported that ease of access to the university from home was a strong or very strong influence on

⁶⁹⁰ For example, Ms S. Elliott, Year 11 Student, Ouyen Secondary College, Written Submission, April 2008, 1; Mr A. Lonergan, Year 11 Student, Ouyen Secondary College, Written Submission, May 2008, 1–2.

⁶⁹¹ Mid Murray Higher Education Working Party, Appendix to Written Submission, March 2008, 16.

⁶⁹² For example, Ms S. Elliott, Year 11 Student, Ouyen Secondary College, Written Submission, April 2008, 1; Mr A. Lonergan, Year 11 Student, Ouyen Secondary College, Written Submission, May 2008, 1–2.

⁶⁹³ Education and Training Committee analysis of 2007–08 VTAC data, May 2009.

⁶⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹⁵ Professor R. Chambers, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Academic, Charles Sturt University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Benalla, 3 March 2009, 44; Mr P. Brown, Executive Officer, Country Education Project, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 25 February 2008, 26–27.

⁶⁹⁶ Mr A. Lonergan, Year 11 Student, Ouyen Secondary College, Written Submission, May 2008, 1–2.

their choice of university.⁶⁹⁷ Investigating a slightly different question, another study used administrative data to identify factors that influence commencing students' decisions to relocate for university. The study found that while it was not the most influential factor, access to institutions did influence the decision to relocate.⁶⁹⁸

For a proportion of prospective students in non-metropolitan areas, proximity to a university campus is a strong influence not only on the choice of where to study, but also on decisions about whether to study at all. In particular, many mature age students have work and family commitments that make it difficult or impossible to move to the city.⁶⁹⁹ Mr Col Sharp, Director, Planning and Audit, Charles Sturt University, observed that there appear to be two types of student in the university's catchment areas: mobile students with a strong interest in a specific field of study, and a group that is tied to the local area and instead chooses their preferred course from locally available options. Describing the latter group in relation to a regional New South Wales campus, he remarked:

The other sort of student is someone who I suspect was probably from a lower socioeconomic background but you find they choose a campus ... they will choose multiple courses from the one campus. They were going to go to Wagga anyway, no matter what. As long as Wagga had a course which vaguely fitted their aspirations, then they'd go there.⁷⁰⁰

For a cohort of potential students in non-metropolitan areas then, the existence of opportunities for local study can be a decisive influence on participation.

On Track data on the motivations of school leavers who choose not to participate in further education also supports the argument that for some potential students, local access is a crucial factor. In the 2008 survey of year 12 completers, 17.5 per cent of those who were not in education or training cited the need to leave home as a reason for not studying, while around 20 per cent reported 'preferred course not offered locally' as a reason.⁷⁰¹ A comparison of the responses of regional and metropolitan respondents shows that regional year 12 completers more commonly cited lack of access as a reason for not undertaking further education or training.⁷⁰² The Committee notes that it should not be assumed that these respondents would necessarily take up local opportunities were they available. Nevertheless, it does suggest that for some young people from regional areas, a lack of local access to education and training opportunities is a significant deterrent to participation.

Course preferences

In Victoria, regional universities and campuses vary in the number and range of courses offered, with these differences closely related to the population of the catchment area. The University of Ballarat offers a relatively broad range of undergraduate and postgraduate programs at its Ballarat campuses, covering: behavioural and social sciences and humanities; education; human movement and sports sciences; information technology and mathematical sciences; nursing; visual and performing arts; science and engineering; applied sciences; and business. Some smaller campuses offer a limited number of

⁶⁹⁷ Richard James, Gabrielle Baldwin and Craig McInnis, *Which University? The factors influencing the choices of prospective undergraduates* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 1999), 25, 36.

⁶⁹⁸ Ross Blakers and others, *Mobility: Why do University Students Move?* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2003), 5.

⁶⁹⁹ Mr L. Money, Shelley (Western Australia), Written Submission, August 2008, 4; Ms E. Lavender, Executive Director, Shepparton Campus, La Trobe University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Benalla, 3 March 2009, 32.

⁷⁰⁰ Mr C. Sharp, Director, Planning and Audit, Charles Sturt University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Benalla, 3 March 2009, 44.

⁷⁰¹ Sheldon Rothman and others, *The On Track Survey 2008: The Destinations of School Leavers in Victoria: Statewide Report* (Melbourne: Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2009), 56.

⁷⁰² Office for Planning, Strategy and Coordination, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (Victoria), *The On Track Survey 2008: LLEN reports* (Melbourne: State of Victoria, 2008).

programs across different faculties (such as La Trobe University in Mildura, Shepparton and Wodonga), while others are largely focused on speciality areas, such as the health sciences specialisation at Monash University's Peninsula campus.

Although some regional campuses have a reasonably comprehensive range of courses, the narrow choice of courses in comparison to metropolitan areas was highlighted by many participants.⁷⁰³ Universities are less likely to offer expensive or specialised courses, such as law, engineering or science, in regional areas.⁷⁰⁴ Furthermore, the courses most commonly available in regional areas—nursing and teacher education—are less likely to attract male students,⁷⁰⁵ which is of particular concern given the very low participation rates of males in regional areas. Therefore, for many students who live in a regional community with a university, it is still necessary to relocate to access an appropriate course.⁷⁰⁶ For prospective students who are not able or willing to relocate, decisions about participation can hinge on whether there is local access to the desired course.

Professor Ross Chambers, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Academic, Charles Sturt University, argued that success in regional provision and raising participation rates in regional areas rests heavily on the programs offered. Professor Chambers attributed much of the university's success in attracting a large proportion of students from the catchment areas to its appealing course profile, which includes a comprehensive range of health science courses, other professional programs, and environmental sciences programs tied to local needs.⁷⁰⁷ Courses that match areas of workforce need also help to attract students who want to make realistic vocational choices about their area of study. Professor Chambers argued that rather than offering what is 'cheap and easy', regional universities must offer programs that interest students:

They want to come and study something worthwhile and I think the secret of our success in attracting and retaining students in the region, and increasing participation, has been to invest in that broad course profile I spoke about with the high end professional courses. So it's not enough to put up your shingle and offer something; you've got to have something that people really want to do.⁷⁰⁸

Professor Richard Teese, Director, Centre for Post-compulsory Education and Lifelong Learning, The University of Melbourne, also emphasised the importance of providing courses that are attractive to students in the area, rather than what the university can offer easily 'because it has staff that are surplus to needs in department X or department Y'.⁷⁰⁹ He argued that Australian Government funding for regional provision should be allocated in such a way as to encourage universities to provide an appropriate range of courses.

⁷⁰³ For example, Mallee Family Care, Written Submission, March 2008, 11; Ms K. Conabere, Parent, Traralgon, Written Submission, February 2008, 1; Ms A. Heywood, Executive Manager, Social Planning, Rural City of Wangaratta, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Benalla, 3 March 2009, 16; Mr V. Callaghan, Member, South West LLEN, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Colac, 29 April 2008, 15; Department of Innovation, Industry and Regional Development (Victoria), Written Submission, May 2008, 14; Girton Grammar School, Written Submission, March 2008, 1.

⁷⁰⁴ National Tertiary Education Union (Victorian Division), Written Submission, March 2008, 2; Professor K. Lipson, Dean, Faculty of Higher Education, Lilydale Campus, Swinburne University of Technology, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Lilydale, 17 July 2008, 18; Mr S. Ilsley, Year 11 Coordinator and College Council Representative, Robinvale Secondary College, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Robinvale, 2 June 2008, 40–41.

⁷⁰⁵ Professor R. Teese, Director, Centre for Post-compulsory Education and Lifelong Learning, The University of Melbourne, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 25 February 2008, 19.

⁷⁰⁶ Ms K. Conabere, Parent, Traralgon, Written Submission, February 2008, 1; Mrs T. Baker, Parent, Bunyip, Written Submission, May 2008, 1; Mrs R. Sutton, Written Submission, March 2008, 3; Australian Council for Educational Research, Written Submission, March 2008, 2; South West LLEN, Written Submission, April 2008, 3; Warrnambool City Council, Written Submission, March 2008, 2–3.

⁷⁰⁷ Professor R. Chambers, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Academic, Charles Sturt University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Benalla, 3 March 2009, 42–43.

⁷⁰⁸ *ibid.*, 43.

⁷⁰⁹ Professor R. Teese, Director, Centre for Post-compulsory Education and Lifelong Learning, The University of Melbourne, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 25 February 2008, 19.

The Committee recognises that there are limitations on the breadth of courses that can be offered at smaller campuses, either in regional or outer urban locations. It is clear that there will always be a proportion of students who cannot access their desired course at the local university. Equally clear is that balancing considerations of student demand, workforce need, and the cost and practicality of delivery is a challenging task for universities. Nevertheless, the Committee believes that universities will be most effective in providing opportunities and raising participation in regional and interface areas where courses are based on considerations of local student demand and workforce need. The Committee therefore seeks adjustments to higher education funding models to ensure they accurately reflect the higher costs of regional delivery, while also providing sufficient incentives for universities to offer courses linked to local employment opportunities.

The Victorian Government may have a role in supporting this outcome through the provision of detailed information about local skills needs. Several university representatives highlighted the inadequacy of existing data in this area.⁷¹⁰ The Committee notes that mapping of skills shortages in Australia largely occurs at a national level, with lists of 'skills in demand' compiled by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. Private sector surveys also offer some information on skills shortages, and a range of sources publish data on skill needs in specific occupations. Dr Lin Crase, Director, Albury-Wodonga Campus, La Trobe University, noted that while universities have access to 'bits and pieces' of skills information, there is no central repository of reliable data to use for planning purposes.⁷¹¹ The Committee heard that this may mean that regional campuses are unable to back a powerful argument for new courses, as described by Dr Andrew Harvey, Acting Executive Director, Bendigo Campus, La Trobe University:

Regional needs are quite difficult to identify ... sometimes you can receive employer feedback, evaluations, or you can receive evidence from various sources that there might be a regional need, but we have to justify establishing a new course for three or four years with a cohort of at least 30 or 40 students every other year, and it's not an easy thing to do.⁷¹²

Some participants argued that regular provision of reliable, disaggregated data on current and projected skills need would assist universities in planning courses for regional campuses.⁷¹³ A representative of Deakin University suggested that the Victorian Government should produce an annual audit of skills shortages across rural and regional areas.⁷¹⁴

Perceptions of quality and status

The Committee heard that regional and small outer urban universities often suffer from perceptions that their courses are less prestigious, and possibly of lower quality, than those at metropolitan campuses. Due to lower student demand, the minimum Equivalent National Tertiary Entrance Ranks (ENTER) required to access courses at regional campuses are generally lower than those at metropolitan universities. For example, the median ENTER of

⁷¹⁰ Dr L. Crase, Director, Albury-Wodonga Campus, La Trobe University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Benalla, 3 March 2009, 37; Dr A. Harvey, Acting Executive Director, Bendigo Campus, La Trobe University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Benalla, 3 March 2009, 37; Dr J. Oriel, Head, Student Equity Unit, Deakin University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Colac, 29 April 2008, 54.

⁷¹¹ Dr L. Crase, Director, Albury-Wodonga Campus, La Trobe University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Benalla, 3 March 2009, 37.

⁷¹² Dr A. Harvey, Acting Executive Director, Bendigo Campus, La Trobe University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Benalla, 3 March 2009, 37.

⁷¹³ Dr J. Oriel, Head, Student Equity Unit, Deakin University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Colac, 29 April 2008, 54; Dr L. Crase, Director, Albury-Wodonga Campus, La Trobe University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Benalla, 3 March 2009, 37.

⁷¹⁴ Dr J. Oriel, Head, Student Equity Unit, Deakin University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Colac, 29 April 2008, 54.

La Trobe University students varies considerably across its metropolitan and regional campuses. At the Bundoora campus in Melbourne, median ENTERs over 2005 to 2007 hovered around the high 70s. At Bendigo (the second largest campus) students had an average ENTER of around 70, while averages at Albury-Wodonga, Mildura and Shepparton ranged from the low to mid 60s.⁷¹⁵ The Committee heard that the lower ENTER requirements at regional campuses contribute to the lower prestige and status of regional courses. Smaller outer urban campuses can face the same problem, as explained by Professor Kay Lipson, Dean, Faculty of Higher Education, Lilydale Campus, Swinburne University of Technology:

Students, teachers and parents continue to choose and evaluate the quality of an educational provider by the ENTER score of the other students who go there, and do not do it on the basis of the quality of the education that they provide. That is a battle that universities have faced from time immemorial and will continue to face, but you have to go to the university that you can get into. So a lot of very able students drive past us and go to another university that provides the same program, because they got in.⁷¹⁶

The Committee found that other factors potentially adding to perceptions of lower status include: difficulties attracting highly qualified staff; fewer resources; the use of blended learning; and the mix of courses at regional campuses.

Research has found that perceptions of quality exert an influence on student choices about course and university. One study of the influences on undergraduate university choices found that applicants to research universities, most of which are located in metropolitan areas, tend to be strongly influenced by a university's research reputation, prestige, and social and cultural life. At the same time, the study found that many students use information about required entry scores as a proxy measure of quality.⁷¹⁷

Evidence suggests that these considerations of status and quality tend to exert a stronger influence on high-achieving school leavers. Research in 2003 on the factors associated with relocating for study found that non-metropolitan school leavers in the top achievement deciles were more likely to relocate to attend a metropolitan university than their lower-achieving counterparts.⁷¹⁸ This can mean that regional universities have particular difficulty in attracting the highest achievers to study locally.

Dr Andrew Harvey, Acting Executive Director, Bendigo Campus, La Trobe University, argued that offering and publicising high-status courses can improve the capacity of regional universities to attract high-achieving students:

Part of the challenge of Bendigo which might be a little different from some of our other campuses is not only to raise the education aspirations for students but to also become university of choice for the high-achieving, for the real high-achieving students. We need to emphasise and advertise that we do have dentistry, pharmacy and civil engineering, visual arts. We have some courses at Bendigo that are not provided at Bundoora.⁷¹⁹

The Committee heard that Monash University has taken a similar approach with its Peninsula campus, offering prestigious health science courses, some of which are not

⁷¹⁵ La Trobe University, Written Submission, March 2008, 7.

⁷¹⁶ Professor K. Lipson, Dean, Faculty of Higher Education, Lilydale Campus, Swinburne University of Technology, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Lilydale, 17 July 2008, 18.

⁷¹⁷ Richard James, Gabrielle Baldwin and Craig McInnis, *Which University? The factors influencing the choices of prospective undergraduates* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 1999), ix.

⁷¹⁸ Ross Blakers and others, *Mobility: Why do University Students Move?* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2003), 21–22.

⁷¹⁹ Dr A. Harvey, Acting Executive Director, Bendigo Campus, La Trobe University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Benalla, 3 March 2009, 33.

offered at metropolitan campuses. Professor Richard Larkins, then Vice-Chancellor, Monash University, also argued that having a campus of an internationally recognised research university in a regional area is a good model because 'it becomes more attractive for students to get a Monash degree than to get a Gippsland university degree, for example'.⁷²⁰

Student populations at regional universities

The different ways in which proximity, course preferences and perceived quality and prestige influence study choices mean that students at regional campuses have different characteristics to urban students. Most regional universities teach a higher proportion of mature age and part-time students. Additionally, students at regional universities are more likely to belong to one or more designated student equity groups.

Figures provided to the Committee by the National Tertiary Education Union (Victorian Division) show that low socioeconomic background students comprise 19.5 per cent of students at regional campuses, compared to only 11.1 per cent of students at metropolitan campuses.⁷²¹ Similarly, 1.5 per cent of enrolments at regional universities and just 0.9 per cent of enrolments at metropolitan universities are Indigenous students.⁷²² The University of Ballarat reported that in 2006, 78.2 per cent of students at the university were members of one or more designated equity groups. More than one-fifth (21.5%) were from a low socioeconomic status background, while 72 per cent were from a rural or isolated area.⁷²³ At La Trobe University's regional campuses, between 23.5 per cent (Bendigo) and 65.7 per cent (Shepparton) of students are from a low socioeconomic status background.⁷²⁴ Thus, in addition to educating more than half of all higher education students from regional areas, regional universities as a whole also teach a disproportionately high number of low socioeconomic status and Indigenous students.

The Committee believes that this is an important point. The Australian Government has highlighted equity as a central concern in higher education, and has set ambitious targets for the participation of people from low socioeconomic status backgrounds. The Committee believes that regional universities, which currently fulfil an important role in providing higher education to students from under-represented groups, will be critical to reaching the Australian Government's participation targets. The Committee therefore encourages governments to support provision of higher education in regional areas as one component of their efforts to increase participation for under-represented groups.

Sustaining strong and effective regional university campuses

The higher cost of regional higher education provision is well documented, and was widely acknowledged by inquiry participants.⁷²⁵ The Committee heard that regional campuses experience diseconomies of scale, meaning that higher staff-student ratios are needed to

⁷²⁰ Professor R. Larkins, Chair, Universities Australia, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 3 March 2008, 24.

⁷²¹ National Tertiary Education Union (Victorian Division), Written Submission, March 2008, 5.

⁷²² *ibid.*

⁷²³ University of Ballarat, Written Submission, March 2008, 14.

⁷²⁴ La Trobe University, Written Submission, March 2008, 10.

⁷²⁵ For example, La Trobe University, Written Submission, March 2008, 4–5; Warrnambool City Council, Written Submission, March 2008, 7; South West LLEN, Written Submission, April 2008, 10; Ms S. Cole, State President, Victorian Branch, National Union of Students, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 14 April 2008, 21; Department of Innovation, Industry and Regional Development (Victoria), Written Submission, May 2008, 27; Mr L. Money, Shelley (Western Australia), Written Submission, August 2008, 3.

sustain student support services and an adequate range of courses.⁷²⁶ Delivery to a dispersed student catchment, and to a larger proportion of part-time, mature age and first-generation students, can be more costly.⁷²⁷ According to the National Tertiary Education Union (Victorian Division), universities also tend to experience greater difficulties in attracting outside sources of revenue, and are consequently more reliant on government funding.⁷²⁸ Some participants from the higher education and government sectors argued that regional universities have more difficulty recruiting international and other fee-paying students,⁷²⁹ while smaller economies in regional areas mean that universities are less able to attract business and industry funding.⁷³⁰ La Trobe University provided figures showing that provision at its four regional campuses costs between 25 and 100 per cent more than at the university's metropolitan campus. These costs increase if student load targets are not met.⁷³¹

In recognition of the higher cost of regional provision, the Australian Government introduced a regional loading in 2004, ranging from 2.5 per cent to 7.5 per cent depending on the size of campus and its distance from a mainland capital city (or 30% for university campuses located in the Northern Territory).⁷³² In 2008, regional universities and campuses received a total of \$30.5 million in regional loading, of which \$3.5 million was allocated to Victorian institutions.⁷³³ University sector representatives told the Committee that current regional loading amounts are insufficient, falling far short of meeting the higher costs of regional provision. Furthermore, the Committee heard that there are anomalies in the regional loading amounts allocated to different universities and campuses, which often bear little relation to the costs of delivery or the needs of students.⁷³⁴ Other participants agreed that the regional loading should be increased.⁷³⁵

Participants from the higher education sector told the Committee that the higher cost of regional delivery, together with insufficient regional loading, means that most regional campuses are cross-subsidised by metropolitan campuses, or receive additional support from alternative sources. For example, while Deakin University reports that its Warrnambool campus is cross-subsidised by \$10 million annually, the university receives only \$600,000 per year in regional loading.⁷³⁶ The University of Ballarat, which receives funding from the Victorian Government in addition to \$1.3 million in regional loading, argued that insufficient loading does little to assist the university to take proactive steps to redress low participation

⁷²⁶ Professor R. James, Director, Centre for the Study of Higher Education, The University of Melbourne, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 3 March 2008, 13; Professor R. Larkins, Chair, Universities Australia, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 3 March 2008, 24; University of Ballarat, Written Submission, March 2008, 4.

⁷²⁷ Mr K. Farrell, Executive Director, Mildura Campus, La Trobe University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Robinvale, 2 June 2008, 45; University of Ballarat, Written Submission, March 2008, 4.

⁷²⁸ National Tertiary Education Union (Victorian Division), Written Submission, March 2008, 4.

⁷²⁹ La Trobe University, Written Submission, March 2008, 13; National Tertiary Education Union (Victorian Division), Written Submission, March 2008, 4; University of Ballarat, Written Submission, March 2008, 3; Department of Innovation, Industry and Regional Development (Victoria), Written Submission, May 2008, 27.

⁷³⁰ National Tertiary Education Union (Victorian Division), Written Submission, March 2008, 4; University of Ballarat, Written Submission, March 2008, 3; Department of Innovation, Industry and Regional Development (Victoria), Written Submission, May 2008, 4.

⁷³¹ La Trobe University, Written Submission, March 2008, 4 – 5.

⁷³² Australian Government, 'Support for higher education institutions,' Backing Australia's Future, http://www.backingaustraliasfuture.gov.au/policy_paper/2.htm#2_4 (accessed 8 July 2009).

⁷³³ Meeting with representatives of the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, Canberra, 17 June 2008.

⁷³⁴ For example, National Tertiary Education Union (Victorian Division), Written Submission, March 2008, 4; University of Ballarat, Written Submission, March 2008, 4–5; Deakin University, Written Submission, March 2008, 13; Meeting with representatives of Curtin University of Technology, Edith Cowan University and University of Western Australia, Perth, 30 April 2009.

⁷³⁵ For example, Ararat Rural City, Appendix to Written Submission, March 2008, 1; South West LLEN, Written Submission, April 2008, 10; Warrnambool City Council, Written Submission, March 2008, 7; Bendigo Senior Secondary College, Written Submission, March 2008, 5.

⁷³⁶ Dr J. Oriol, Head, Student Equity Unit, Deakin University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Colac, 29 April 2008, 54.

rates in regional areas.⁷³⁷ Additionally, it should be noted that higher education campuses in interface areas, although they often face similar challenges to regional universities, do not attract any regional loading.⁷³⁸

Regional loading was a key issue addressed by the Review of Australian Higher Education. The review found that the regional loading is not sufficiently targeted to those campuses that have major problems achieving and maintaining viable student numbers due to their location:

... the panel could discern little relationship in a number of cases to the existence of a loading and the location of a campus. Even more mysterious was the underlying logic of the weightings. But its greatest concern is that this loading for provision in regional and remote areas provides no clear incentive to any institution or provider to set up new programs in areas of need nor to work collaboratively with others to address the real problems of provision in localities where there are not enough people to support a viable campus.⁷³⁹

The review concluded that the regional loading should be abolished and new arrangements implemented. Specifically, the review recommended an additional \$80 million per year from 2012 for 'sustainable regional higher education provision' to replace current regional loading arrangements. While recommending increased funding for regional delivery, however, the review indicates a preference for 'innovative, collaborative, local solutions' to provision, suggesting that some 'rationalisation' of traditional regional campuses might be necessary.⁷⁴⁰

While inquiry participants spoke about the higher operating costs of regional universities and the inadequacy of regional loading, the Committee notes the absence of detailed costings for regional delivery. The Committee therefore sees a need for the Australian Government to undertake further analysis of delivery costs in regional areas. Given significant dissatisfaction with current arrangements, the Committee believes that changes to the level and distribution of funding for regional provision are required. It supports proposals for increased overall funding levels, as well as the Review of Australian Higher Education's call for collaborative local solutions to higher education provision in smaller regional communities. The Committee does not believe, however, that this aim is incompatible with sustaining and strengthening existing campuses in rural and regional Victoria. The Committee believes that despite their higher costs, these campuses have a vital and continuing role in the economic and social health of regional communities. Therefore, the Committee would be concerned about the impact of any rationalisation of campuses on regional communities and levels of participation in higher education.

The Committee supports the view of the National Tertiary Education Union (Victorian Division) that provision of long-term, dedicated funding would enable greater stability for staff and students at regional campuses, thereby increasing their long-term viability and expansion.⁷⁴¹ The Committee believes that funding models should be revised to ensure there are sufficient incentives for universities to deliver a diversity of high quality higher education courses into regional areas, closely linked to labour market needs. Courses should not be restricted to nursing and teaching, but could also include a range of

⁷³⁷ University of Ballarat, Written Submission, March 2008, 3–4.

⁷³⁸ Professor K. Lipson, Dean, Faculty of Higher Education, Lilydale Campus, Swinburne University of Technology, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Lilydale, 17 July 2008, 18.

⁷³⁹ Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, *Review of Australian Higher Education: Final Report* (Canberra: DEEWR, 2008), 110.

⁷⁴⁰ *ibid.*, xiv, 113.

⁷⁴¹ Ms R. May, Industrial Officer, National Tertiary Education Union (Victorian Division), Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 14 April 2008, 26.

professional qualifications such as engineering, sciences and high-end business degrees. Revised funding models should take into account the need for increased collaborative models of delivery for such courses, as well as the need to raise aspirations and demand around courses relevant to local economic growth and employment opportunities. The Committee notes that there may be some opportunities for the Victorian Government to provide specific project funding in this area, closely targeted towards priority student groups, geographic regions and/or specific skills needs.

A further recommendation put forward in the Review of Australian Higher Education was that the Australian Government commission a feasibility study to examine the potential for development of a national university for regional areas, created through a merger and, possibly, the consolidation of existing regional campuses. The review outlined the possible role for this university:

This new, consolidated university would be charged with a mission to offer accessible, high quality education in the regions. Internationally-recognised expertise in delivery of education to regional areas and isolated communities could be concentrated in such a university and it could be given a charter to address regional provision nationally.⁷⁴²

The Committee heard much opposition from the university sector within Victoria and in Western Australia to the proposed national regional university. Professor David Battersby, Vice-Chancellor, University of Ballarat, argued that such an arrangement would not serve the interests of communities in regional Victoria.⁷⁴³ Similarly, Professor Jeanette Hackett, Vice-Chancellor, Curtin University of Technology, argued that universities operating in regional areas need to engage comprehensively with local communities, and that this cannot be done from 'somewhere else'.⁷⁴⁴ Dr Lin Crase, Director, Albury-Wodonga Campus, La Trobe University, argued that there are significant theoretical and moral reasons to object to a national regional university and the concept of a separate education for students in regional areas.⁷⁴⁵

The Committee notes that the proposed national university for regional Australia has not yet been described in detail. Full consideration of the potential advantages and disadvantages of the model is therefore not possible at this stage. The Committee believes that irrespective of which universities operate in regional areas, universities and campuses need to have strong ties to their host communities, allowing adaptation to the unique needs and contexts of different regions.

Off-campus study

While on-campus study remains the primary way in which students participate in higher education, a substantial and growing number of students study off campus. As universities move increasingly towards greater flexibility in higher education provision, the distinction between on-campus and off-campus study (also referred to as 'external study' or 'distance education') has become less clear.⁷⁴⁶ For example, most universities now incorporate

⁷⁴² Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, *Review of Australian Higher Education: Final Report* (Canberra: DEEWR, 2008), 113

⁷⁴³ Professor D. Battersby, Vice-Chancellor, University of Ballarat, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 30 March 2009, 32–33.

⁷⁴⁴ Professor J. Hackett, Vice-Chancellor, Curtin University of Technology, Meeting with representatives of Curtin University of Technology, Edith Cowan University and University of Western Australia, Perth, 30 April 2009.

⁷⁴⁵ Dr L. Crase, Director, Albury-Wodonga Campus, La Trobe University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Benalla, 3 March 2009, 35.

⁷⁴⁶ Dr D. Woodhouse, Executive Director, Australian Universities Quality Agency, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 23 July 2008, 13.

elements of online delivery in most of their courses. Similarly, off-campus students may have opportunities for greater interaction with peers and teachers through online conferencing, local study groups or short, intensive on-campus study blocks. Nevertheless, the Committee believes that a useful distinction can still be drawn between students who regularly attend classes on campus or at another delivery site, and those who study largely or wholly in their own locations and/or in their own time.

Provision of off-campus study

The major Victorian providers of off-campus study are Deakin University and Monash University. Approximately 35 per cent of Deakin University's domestic students study off campus.⁷⁴⁷ In addition, all students commencing undergraduate degrees since 2004 are required to complete at least one unit wholly online. Deakin University students are not restricted to a single mode of study but may choose a combination of on-campus and off-campus units.⁷⁴⁸ Monash University offers approximately 150 courses in off-campus mode, and as at Deakin University, both on- and off-campus students can choose to complete individual units in either mode.⁷⁴⁹ In 2007, approximately 14 per cent of Monash University's domestic undergraduate students were enrolled off-campus or in multi-modal study, as were 46 per cent of domestic postgraduate students.⁷⁵⁰ Other Victorian universities offer a limited number of courses off campus, largely at the postgraduate level. Victorian students can also enrol in off-campus study with interstate universities.

Open Universities Australia is a national higher education provider that offers access to off-campus higher education. Open Universities Australia is owned by a consortium of seven universities that, through Open Universities Australia, deliver a substantial range of undergraduate and postgraduate courses in arts, humanities and social sciences, business, education, health, law, information technology and science. Most units are delivered through a combination of print and online materials. There are no prerequisites or entry requirements for most courses, and study is highly flexible. Students pay the full costs of tuition, but are able to defer payment through FEE-HELP. In 2007, there were 7,434 Victorian students enrolled through Open Universities Australia, of whom 1,277 (17.8%) were from regional Victoria.⁷⁵¹

Geographical distribution of off-campus students

While the nature of off-campus study might suggest that it is particularly appropriate for rural and regional students without access to a local campus, evidence received by the Committee indicates that the majority of Victoria's off-campus students in fact live in metropolitan areas. The Committee heard that when compared to population reference values, Melbourne-based students are over-represented among Open Universities Australia's Victorian cohort, while students from remote areas are under-represented.⁷⁵² In 2008, 2,160 (34%) Victorian domestic off-campus students at Deakin University were from outside of Melbourne.⁷⁵³ Interestingly, almost half of these non-metropolitan students

⁷⁴⁷ Supplementary information provided by Deakin University, March 2009.

⁷⁴⁸ Deakin University, 'Information about online and off-campus study,' Deakin University, <http://www.deakin.edu.au/future-students/online-offcampus-studies/index.php> (accessed 5 June 2008).

⁷⁴⁹ Monash University, 'Off-campus learning,' Monash University, <http://www.monash.edu.au/offcampus/> (accessed 14 January 2009).

⁷⁵⁰ Supplementary information provided by Monash University, March 2009.

⁷⁵¹ Open Universities Australia, Written Submission, March 2008, 8.

⁷⁵² Supplementary information provided by Open Universities Australia, July 2008.

⁷⁵³ Supplementary information provided by Deakin University, March 2009.

resided in the Barwon region, in which Deakin University has a strong physical presence. In 2008, approximately 23 per cent of off-campus student enrolments at Monash University were from a rural or isolated home location,⁷⁵⁴ while the bulk of students resided in Melbourne.⁷⁵⁵

That the majority of off-campus students live in metropolitan areas highlights the point that lack of proximity to a university campus is only one reason for choosing off-campus study. The Committee heard that off-campus students tend to be older, and choose off-campus study because work and family commitments make it inconvenient to attend campus at set times.⁷⁵⁶

While it is clear that off-campus study is not, in itself, the solution to increasing higher education participation in regional areas, the Committee heard calls for increased provision of off-campus higher education. Some inquiry participants argued that the range of courses that can be studied off campus should increase, or that more universities should allow students to complete individual units in this mode.⁷⁵⁷ The Committee received two submissions from regional Victorians who wished to study off campus for postgraduate qualifications, but had been unable to find an appropriate course.⁷⁵⁸ Both noted that while interstate universities offer the desired courses in off-campus mode, required attendance at on-campus intensive study blocks makes this option expensive and impractical. Expanded off-campus provision on the part of Victorian universities was therefore a preferred option.

Effectiveness and suitability of off-campus study

The Committee heard from universities that off-campus study can be convenient and effective, but that it is not suitable for all learners. A representative of Swinburne University of Technology told the Committee that the pedagogies used in off-campus study are extremely effective, particularly for postgraduate students.⁷⁵⁹ Dr David Woodhouse, Executive Director, Australian Universities Quality Agency, told the Committee that off-campus provision is generally of a high standard, although problems can arise around students' access to appropriate computer and internet facilities, electronic provision of library resources, access to academic support and feedback, and capacity to fully engage in the university experience.⁷⁶⁰

While universities tended to emphasise the effectiveness of off-campus teaching and learning, the perceived lack of support available to students studying off campus was of concern for a number of participants. The requirement that students manage their own learning to a greater extent than on-campus students can make this mode of studying more

⁷⁵⁴ Supplementary information provided by Monash University, March 2009.

⁷⁵⁵ Associate Professor H. Ballis, Acting Pro Vice-Chancellor, Gippsland Campus, Monash University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Churchill, 19 May 2008, 29–30.

⁷⁵⁶ Mr S. Hamilton, Chief Executive Officer, Open Universities Australia, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 23 July 2008, 18; Professor K. Lipson, Dean, Faculty of Higher Education, Lilydale Campus, Swinburne University of Technology, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Lilydale, 17 July 2008, 24.

⁷⁵⁷ Gippsland Local Government Network, Written Submission, April 2008, 5; Mr J. Hicks, Chief Executive Officer, Hindmarsh Shire Council, Written Submission, March 2008, 2; Mr G. and Mrs L. Code, Parents, Aberfeldy, Written Submission, May 2008, 1; Ms J. Matthews, Project Officer, South Gippsland Bass Coast LLEN, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Churchill, 19 May 2008, 52; Ms S. Elliott, Year 11 Student, Ouyen Secondary College, Written Submission, April 2008, 1.

⁷⁵⁸ Dr K. Brothie, General Practitioner, Mount Beauty, Written Submission, February 2008, 1; Ms B. Medhurst, Parent, Nyora, Written Submission, April 2008, 1.

⁷⁵⁹ Professor K. Lipson, Dean, Faculty of Higher Education, Lilydale Campus, Swinburne University of Technology, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Lilydale, 17 July 2008, 24.

⁷⁶⁰ Dr D. Woodhouse, Executive Director, Australian Universities Quality Agency, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 23 July 2008, 13–14.

difficult.⁷⁶¹ In one submission, a mature age student from regional Victoria described her experiences of both on- and off-campus study. After studying at La Trobe University's Shepparton campus she realised that her interest lay in another subject area and switched to off-campus study at Monash University:

I did very well at La Trobe... [But] studying by correspondence was very different. I missed the contact with lecturers and fellow students. I felt unsupported by Monash and often felt that I just didn't know what was expected of me. I dropped out of university altogether after just a couple of months ...⁷⁶²

Findings from the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement also reveal lower scores for off-campus students on a scale measuring the level and nature of interactions with teaching staff.⁷⁶³

Off-campus students may also miss out on some of the broader experiences that support learning in higher education, particularly for younger students and those who are new to tertiary study. Ms Margie Barton, a parent from Bairnsdale in East Gippsland, described the other dimensions of the university experience that are not available to off-campus students:

I think there is more to university life and tertiary study than the actual subject you are studying. For instance my daughter is doing a visual arts degree, and there are all the galleries and there are things happening in Melbourne—apart from just growing up and your life. Becoming an adult, I think, is very important, and you cannot do it online.⁷⁶⁴

Again, Australasian Survey of Student Engagement respondents who were studying off campus scored lower than their on-campus peers on scales measuring active learning and participation in broader educational activities.⁷⁶⁵ For these reasons, an enriching on-campus university education remains a preferred mode of teaching and learning for universities and for most students.⁷⁶⁶

According to data provided to the Committee by Deakin University and Monash University, success and retention rates and average marks are lower for off-campus students, particularly at the undergraduate level.⁷⁶⁷ Similarly, Mr Stuart Hamilton, Chief Executive Officer, Open Universities Australia, told the Committee that most students study only between three and five units, and that approximately half of all students are retained from year to year.⁷⁶⁸ While some of these students may transfer to on-campus study, or may never have intended to study a full degree program, these figures indicate that few students complete a degree qualification in an off-campus mode through Open Universities Australia.

⁷⁶¹ Ms J. Matthews, Project Officer, South Gippsland Bass Coast LLEN, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Churchill, 19 May 2008, 56–57; Ms L. Toddun, Facilitator, Glenelg Local Community Partnership, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Hamilton, 28 April 2008, 34; Mr S. McEachern, Representative, National Tertiary Education Union (Victorian Division), Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 14 April 2008, 27.

⁷⁶² Ms W. Opresnik, Student and Parent, Shepparton, Written Submission, August 2008, 1.

⁷⁶³ Australian Council for Educational Research, *Attracting, Engaging and Retaining: New Conversations About Learning: Australasian Student Engagement Report, Australasian Survey of Student Engagement* (Camberwell: ACER, 2008), 15.

⁷⁶⁴ Ms M. Barton, Parent, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Bairnsdale, 20 May 2008, 28.

⁷⁶⁵ Australian Council for Educational Research, *Attracting, Engaging and Retaining: New Conversations About Learning: Australasian Student Engagement Report, Australasian Survey of Student Engagement* (Camberwell: ACER, 2008), ix, 14–15, 18.

⁷⁶⁶ For example, Professor K. Lipson, Dean, Faculty of Higher Education, Lilydale Campus, Swinburne University of Technology, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Lilydale, 17 July 2008, 24; Professor P. Steele, Pro Vice-Chancellor, Campus Coordination and Academic Director, Berwick and Peninsula Campuses, Monash University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Rosebud, 12 May 2008, 44.

⁷⁶⁷ Supplementary information provided by Deakin University and Monash University, March 2009.

⁷⁶⁸ Mr S. Hamilton, Chief Executive Officer, Open Universities Australia, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 23 July 2008, 22.

Supporting off-campus students through study centres

Study centres are one mechanism that may support off-campus students to be successful in their higher education studies. Study centres can be stand alone university operations, co-located with other education and training providers, or even run by a non-university organisation. At their most basic, study centres are not staffed, but offer access to ICT facilities and study spaces. Some centres also employ general staff who provide administrative and/or study skills support, and may have teaching spaces for classes with visiting academic staff. Unlike university campuses and centres, study centres do not have permanent academic staff and are not sites for ongoing course delivery. However, study centres may help to overcome some of the difficulties that can be associated with off-campus study, such as social isolation and lack of access to appropriate ICT.

While the Committee is not aware of any study centres currently operating in regional Victoria, they are well developed in some other Australian states. In Western Australia, a small and highly dispersed rural population is served by a network of more than 100 'telecentres'. These community owned and operated study centres provide off-campus students and other community members with access to computers and internet, printing and photocopying services, teaching facilities and videoconferencing.⁷⁶⁹ Similar arrangements exist in Queensland, where Learning Network Queensland, part of the Brisbane North Institute of TAFE, operates 34 Learning Centres across the state. As with Western Australia's telecentres, the remit of the Learning Centres is broader than higher education, but off-campus higher education students are able to access quiet study spaces, computers, and videoconferencing and teleconferencing facilities. Local tutorial rooms are available for use by visiting academics and students can undertake university enabling programs at the centres.⁷⁷⁰

In New South Wales, the University of New England has developed its own network of ten regional Access Centres, which support the university's substantial cohort of off-campus students. Access Centres are co-located with TAFE campuses and give students access to computer, internet, printing, telephone and videoconferencing facilities. They also have spaces for group study, and study skills and exam preparation workshops are held in all centres. Two of the Access Centres are staffed and offer course advice and other university information.⁷⁷¹

Several inquiry participants suggested that similar types of facilities should be set up in regional Victoria in order to provide additional support to off-campus students.⁷⁷² Stakeholders from the Mornington Peninsula region argued that 'learning hubs' could be established, making use of the existing education infrastructure in regional areas, including TAFE institutes, public libraries and school facilities.⁷⁷³ These 'hubs' could be made available to off-campus students from the region, providing an opportunity for these students to meet and interact. The Committee also heard the suggestion that higher education

⁷⁶⁹ Department of Local Government and Regional Development (Western Australia), 'WA Telecentre Network,' DLGRD, <http://www.dlgrd.wa.gov.au/RegionDev/Telecentres.asp> (accessed 4 May 2009).

⁷⁷⁰ Learning Network Queensland, 'Services and Facilities,' LNQ, <http://www.lnq.net.au/servicesFacilities.aspx> (accessed 6 July 2009).

⁷⁷¹ Department of Education and Training (New South Wales), Written Submission, February 2008, 4; University of New England, 'Regional Access Centres,' UNE, <http://www.une.edu.au/ac/othercentres/> (accessed 15 January 2009).

⁷⁷² For example, Frankston Learning City Stakeholder Network, Written Submission, March 2008, 3, 5; Frankston Mornington Peninsula LLEN, Written Submission, March 2008, 5; Chisholm Institute of TAFE, Written Submission, March 2008, 6; Mr M. Brewer, Parent, Warragul, Written Submission, April 2008, 1; Rural City of Wangaratta, Written Submission, May 2008, 4.

⁷⁷³ Frankston Learning City Stakeholder Network, Written Submission, March 2008, 3, 5; Frankston Mornington Peninsula LLEN, Written Submission, March 2008, 5.

institutions that already have a presence in a regional or outer urban area could 'host' off-campus students from other institutions, providing them with access to ICT, study groups and other assistance.⁷⁷⁴ Similarly, one submission from Western Australia argued that Australian Government funding should be allocated to existing regional education and training providers for the support of off-campus students (of any university) in the region.⁷⁷⁵

On the other hand, Mr Stuart Hamilton, Chief Executive Officer, Open Universities Australia, told the Committee that while centres for the support of off-campus students are initially appealing, they may not suit the requirements of off-campus students:

The experience is they do not make much difference to access to our kinds of courses because of the nature of our kinds of students. When I first got into this job and looked at Learning Network Queensland it seemed to me on the face of it to provide a great model across Australia. It does have the best network by far ... There is nothing really like that in Victoria, and I thought that would be a problem but it does not prove so. Our rural numbers in Victoria are better than any other state, so it is not really an issue.⁷⁷⁶

Mr Hamilton noted that students who participate in higher education through Open Universities Australia are typically time-poor working adults who often lack the time or inclination to visit a learning centre.⁷⁷⁷

The Committee notes that Victoria is much smaller than either Western Australia or Queensland and has a less dispersed population, with relatively good coverage by university and TAFE campuses. The Committee therefore believes that there would be little justification for the establishment of new off-campus study centres in Victoria, particularly given uncertainties about the level of student demand for such facilities. However, there may be further scope for existing education and training providers, and other interested entities such as local government, to provide support to off-campus students in regional areas. The Committee encourages providers of off-campus education to work with institutions and organisations in regional areas to enhance students' access to existing educational infrastructure.

University centres

Throughout the inquiry, the Committee heard about a range of models for higher education delivery through university 'centres' and their various benefits and drawbacks. There is no single model for a university centre, and existing centres differ in terms of their size, functions, staffing arrangements and location. They are smaller in size and more limited in scope than most university campuses, and operate in smaller regional communities that are not large enough to support a campus. Only a few courses are offered at these centres, typically through a combination of face-to-face teaching and online or distance delivery. In addition to teaching, some centres also support higher degree research students, or have other linkages with research activities. University centres may be stand alone facilities or co-located with other organisations such as TAFE institutes.

The Committee notes that approaches such as the university centre model were favoured in the Review of Australian Higher Education's discussion of regional higher education provision. The review endorsed innovative and flexible delivery arrangements rather than

⁷⁷⁴ South East LLEN, Written Submission, May 2008, 5.

⁷⁷⁵ Mr L. Money, Shelley (Western Australia), Written Submission, August 2008, 7.

⁷⁷⁶ Mr S. Hamilton, Chief Executive Officer, Open Universities Australia, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 23 July 2008, 19.

⁷⁷⁷ *ibid.*

the expansion of traditional campuses, noting that such approaches 'allow existing providers to make use of a variety of teaching arrangements such as distance education, collaboration and sharing of infrastructure with local Vocational Education and Training (VET) providers, videoconferencing and fly-in, fly-out academic staff'.⁷⁷⁸ These forms of higher education delivery were of central interest to the Committee in its deliberations, which focused particularly on the quality and cost effectiveness of such models.

University centre models

In Victoria, the main university centre model examined by the Committee was RMIT University's learning and research centre in Hamilton. The centre offers a Bachelor of Nursing and a small number of graduate diplomas and certificates. In addition, the centre supports some higher degree research students and is also a resource for off-campus students studying with Open Universities Australia. Dr Leone Wheeler, Head, Learning Community Partnerships, RMIT University, told the Committee that research is also an important focus for the centre, which has a 'local global' research program and a regional development research program. The centre also has a number of staff involved in community engagement and partnerships, and works with a community advisory board made up of community members and business, local government and health representatives.⁷⁷⁹

The Committee also became aware of a well-developed university centre model in Geraldton, approximately 400 kilometres north of Perth on Western Australia's coast. The model was of particular interest to the Committee as it had been described as having several unique features, including: strong community input and ownership through the Geraldton Universities Access Group; the involvement of multiple university partners, together with a TAFE institute; and the construction of a purpose-built facility following initial use of existing infrastructure. In April 2009, the Committee travelled to Geraldton and Perth to investigate the model, meeting with Geraldton Universities Centre board members, staff and students, as well as representatives of the centre's three university partners, University of Western Australia, Curtin University of Technology and Edith Cowan University.

The Committee heard that there has been interest in replicating a similar university centre model in Victoria's north-west. Inspired in part by the Geraldton Universities Centre, the Mid Murray Higher Education Working Party has put significant effort into developing a proposal for a 'Central Murray Universities Centre'.⁷⁸⁰ The proposed centre was to be a site for the flexible provision of a range of degree courses, perhaps limited to the first year of the course. Courses would be delivered online by a partner university, with tutorial support from trained local tutors. Courses might also include community-based practicums and intensive on-campus study blocks. A facilitator would manage the centre, monitoring student demand in the local region and working with community and industry to stimulate this demand, mirroring the strong community input that is a feature of the Geraldton Universities Centre.⁷⁸¹ Unlike the Geraldton Universities Centre, however, the proposed Mid Murray Universities Centre was to be based at existing sites, rather than requiring a purpose-built

⁷⁷⁸ Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, *Review of Australian Higher Education: Final Report* (Canberra: DEEWR, 2008), 111.

⁷⁷⁹ Dr L. Wheeler, Head, Learning Community Partnerships, RMIT University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Hamilton, 28 April 2008, 49–50.

⁷⁸⁰ Details of the proposed centre are provided in Mid Murray Higher Education Working Party, Appendix to Written Submission, March 2008.

⁷⁸¹ Mr G. Stewart, Executive Officer, Murray Mallee LLEN, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Robinvale, 2 June 2008, 11–12.

facility.⁷⁸² In June 2009, the Committee was advised that Swan Hill has been selected as the first site for the new Deakin at your Doorstep initiative (see below).

Blended learning

A major topic of discussion throughout the inquiry was the use of what is often termed blended learning. Blended learning typically involves a substantial component of online learning, supported by a face-to-face component. The face-to-face component may involve onsite tutorials or laboratory classes, visiting staff, or intensive study blocks at the main university campus. There may also be an extended industry placement as part of the course. Blended learning is commonly used at university centres and smaller campuses, but is increasingly used at larger metropolitan campuses as well.

Blended learning is the primary mode of learning for students at the Geraldton Universities Centre, where most students study online, but also participate in either a tutorial or study group each week. The Committee heard that for students studying education at the centre, most tutors are practicing teachers from the local community.⁷⁸³ Similarly, RMIT University also employs what it terms a 'flexible delivery mode' at its Hamilton learning and research centre. Learning and teaching is 'predominantly online' but with onsite tutorials and laboratory classes taught by academic staff based in Hamilton.⁷⁸⁴ The Committee also heard that La Trobe University's new regional strategy signals an increased focus on blended learning at its regional campuses, where some courses are already delivered in this manner.⁷⁸⁵

Advantages of blended learning

Blended learning is seen as having some key advantages as a delivery mode in regional areas. Blended learning can help to overcome the problems of scale that make regional delivery more expensive. Thus, it would appear that blended learning may increase opportunities to access a wider range of courses. Universities also argue that by allowing the involvement of highly qualified metropolitan-based academic staff, blended learning enhances the quality of regional provision.⁷⁸⁶ In discussions with the university partners of Geraldton Universities Centre, the Committee heard that it is difficult to attract quality academic staff to teach in regional areas. One university representative argued that there is 'a quality issue' where face-to-face teaching is provided by local practitioners, rather than by tutors with outside expertise.⁷⁸⁷ A similar point was made by Mr Kent Farrell, Executive Director, Mildura Campus, La Trobe University, who noted that in some courses at regional campuses the university 'beams in' lecturers who are able to deliver the best teaching and maintain quality.⁷⁸⁸

⁷⁸² Mid Murray Higher Education Working Party, Written Submission, March 2008, 17.

⁷⁸³ Meetings with representatives of the Geraldton Universities Centre and Geraldton University Access Group, Geraldton, 28–29 April 2009.

⁷⁸⁴ RMIT University, 'Hamilton: Bachelor of Nursing,' RMIT University, <http://www.rmit.edu.au/hamilton/nursing> (accessed 18 January 2009).

⁷⁸⁵ Dr A. Harvey, Acting Executive Director, Bendigo Campus, La Trobe University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Benalla, 3 March 2009, 37.

⁷⁸⁶ Professor R. Quin, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Education, Curtin University of Technology, Meeting with representatives of Curtin University of Technology, Edith Cowan University and University of Western Australia, Perth, 30 April 2009; Mr K. Farrell, Executive Director, Mildura Campus, La Trobe University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Robinvale, 2 June 2008, 49.

⁷⁸⁷ Professor R. Quin, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Education, Curtin University of Technology, Meeting with representatives of Curtin University of Technology, Edith Cowan University and University of Western Australia, Perth, 30 April 2009.

⁷⁸⁸ Mr K. Farrell, Executive Director, Mildura Campus, La Trobe University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Robinvale, 2 June 2008, 49.

Quality considerations

On the other hand, evidence indicates some differences between the views of universities and other stakeholders regarding what constitutes 'quality' in regional higher education provision. Among student, school and community representatives in regional Victoria, there is a relatively widespread perception that blended learning is an inferior pedagogy that is disengaging, unsupportive and unappealing to most prospective students.⁷⁸⁹ Some university participants recognised these concerns, and acknowledged that the increasing reliance on blended learning has the potential to reduce the attractiveness of local study for prospective students, particularly school leavers.⁷⁹⁰ Mr Farrell therefore argued that universities need to develop blended learning methods that balance competing demands and appeal to students:

The blended delivery model is a good example of why we have not used the technology as much as perhaps one might consider we should use it ... what we are hearing is people do not want that. It is no good providing a product that people do not necessarily want. What we need to do is try and find a balance between the use of technology and the use of traditional university face-to-face tutorials, lectures and so forth.⁷⁹¹

Most importantly, inquiry participants consistently stressed the importance of retaining substantial face-to-face teaching, group interaction and support if blended learning is to be an attractive and high quality option for regional students.⁷⁹² At RMIT University's Hamilton learning and research centre, lectures are recorded and delivered via videoconferencing, while tutorials and laboratory classes are conducted with local academic staff. A representative of the centre told the Committee that students' comments indicate that the strong support from local staff more than offsets the absence of services and facilities that are offered on larger campuses.⁷⁹³

The role of face-to-face teaching as a component of blended learning was also a central theme in discussions at the Geraldton Universities Centre. The Committee heard that a guiding principle for the establishment of the centre had been 'high tech-high touch': in other words, delivery was to make full use of new technologies while retaining face-to-face contact and interaction.⁷⁹⁴ The Geraldton University Access Group argued that this approach, combined with strong community input, had led to strong student demand, and meant that the quality of provision at the Centre was comparable to that at metropolitan campuses.⁷⁹⁵

⁷⁸⁹ For example, Ms C. Torpey, Careers Coordinator, Ouyen Secondary College, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Ouyen, 3 June 2008, 6–7; Ms S. Cole, State President, Victorian Branch, National Union of Students, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 14 April 2008, 20; Gannawarra Shire Council, Written Submission, March 2008, 10.

⁷⁹⁰ For example, Dr L. Crase, Director, Albury-Wodonga Campus, La Trobe University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Benalla, 3 March 2009, 37; Mr K. Farrell, Executive Director, Mildura Campus, La Trobe University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Robinvale, 2 June 2008, 44.

⁷⁹¹ Mr K. Farrell, Executive Director, Mildura Campus, La Trobe University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Robinvale, 2 June 2008, 44.

⁷⁹² For example, Professor B. Adam, Acting Head, School of Rural Health, The University of Melbourne, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 23 March 2009, 9; Gannawarra Shire Council, Written Submission, March 2008, 9; Dr S. McEachern and Ms R. May, Representatives, National Tertiary Education Union (Victorian Division), Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 14 April 2008, 27, 29; Ms S. Cole, State President, Victorian Branch, National Union of Students, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 14 April 2008, 20.

⁷⁹³ Dr L. Wheeler, Head, Learning Community Partnerships, RMIT University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Hamilton, 28 April 2008, 49.

⁷⁹⁴ Meetings with representatives of the Geraldton Universities Centre and Geraldton University Access Group, Geraldton, 28–29 April 2009.

⁷⁹⁵ Meeting with representatives of Geraldton University Access Group, Geraldton, 28 April 2009.

More recently, the university partners involved in the Geraldton Universities Centre have shifted to a greater reliance on online learning. They argue that this approach meets budgetary requirements, while also maintaining the quality of provision. However, stakeholders have expressed dismay at this development. While acknowledging that online delivery of lectures can be beneficial, the community is passionate in its belief that face-to-face content tutorials (not simply 'study groups') are a vital component of a higher education degree.⁷⁹⁶ In discussions with the Committee, several students, in particular, were scathing in their criticism of the lack of face-to-face interaction and teaching in their courses, as well as the cancellation of some practicums. Education students noted that when studying to enter a profession focused on relationships and interactions, face-to-face opportunities are particularly important. One student described the two hours per week of face-to-face time as 'token' and insufficient to constitute genuine 'blended' learning.⁷⁹⁷

The Committee also heard that for blended learning to be effective and high quality, academic staff must be appropriately trained in how to design and deliver units in this mode. Professor Bill Adam, Acting Head, School of Rural Health, The University of Melbourne, noted that teaching via videoconferencing uses specific teaching techniques and therefore requires special training.⁷⁹⁸ Delivery using blended learning may also necessitate time-consuming adaptations to unit designs and the development of new learning materials.⁷⁹⁹ A Curtin University of Technology academic who delivers units online told the Committee that adapting the curriculum can be problematic, and that time for this activity must be built into planning and delivery. He also noted that academics can develop good blended learning programs once they have developed the appropriate skills, but that they are sometimes left to develop these skills independently through trial and error.⁸⁰⁰

Finally, blended learning must be supported by appropriate technological capabilities, in terms of both equipment and bandwidth. Some participants commented on how attempts by universities to utilise ICT more heavily have often been hampered by technological problems.⁸⁰¹ Ms Robyn May, Industrial Officer, National Tertiary Education Union (Victorian Division), made the point that these problems mean that there can be a wide gulf between descriptions of blended learning and students' experiences of it:

Often it can look like it is going to be great. You get the podcast and the this and the that, but the reality is that the student rolls up, the machinery breaks down, there is no-one to help you out.⁸⁰²

Similarly, three principals from regional schools noted that videoconferencing technology can be unreliable, making it unattractive for both students and teachers.⁸⁰³ However, as technologies continue to develop and if access to high speed broadband improves, the

⁷⁹⁶ Meetings with representatives of the Geraldton Universities Centre and Geraldton University Access Group, Geraldton, 28–29 April 2009.

⁷⁹⁷ Meetings with students of the Geraldton Universities Centre, Geraldton, 29 April 2009.

⁷⁹⁸ Professor B. Adam, Acting Head, School of Rural Health, The University of Melbourne, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 23 March 2009, 9.

⁷⁹⁹ Dr S. McEachern, Representative, National Tertiary Education Union (Victorian Division), Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 14 April 2008, 27; South West Institute of TAFE, Written Submission, April 2008, 3.

⁸⁰⁰ Dr M. Harslett, Academic Course Coordinator, Curtin Centre for Regional Education, Geraldton Universities Centre, Meeting with representatives of Geraldton Universities Centre, Geraldton, 28 April 2009.

⁸⁰¹ Professor B. Adam, Acting Head, School of Rural Health, The University of Melbourne, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 23 March 2009, 9; Associate Professor H. Ballis, Acting Pro Vice-Chancellor, Gippsland Campus, Monash University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Churchill, 19 May 2008, 30.

⁸⁰² Ms R. May, Industrial Officer, National Tertiary Education Union (Victorian Division), Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 14 April 2008, 29.

⁸⁰³ Mrs H. Thiele, Principal, Murrayville Community College, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Ouyen, 3 June 2008, 50; Mr R. Boucher, Principal, Swifts Creek Secondary College, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Bairnsdale, 20 May 2008, 33; Mr K. Lee, Principal, Robinvale Secondary College, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Robinvale, 2 June 2008, 34.

Committee expects that these problems will diminish, enhancing the effectiveness of online technologies in teaching and learning. At the same time, the Committee believes that the prevalence of technological difficulties highlights the need for universities using blended learning to make sufficient investments in ICT equipment, connectivity and technical support.

In essence, the Committee believes that it is of great importance that higher education students who are studying at university centres, or through other flexible delivery arrangements, receive a high quality education. As they pay the same course costs, they deserve quality and services comparable to those received by students studying in the major cities. The Committee therefore believes that higher education accreditation and quality assurance processes should examine each specific mode and site of delivery to ensure that all students, regardless of location or study mode, are receiving a high quality education. Where blended learning is used, quality assurance procedures should ensure appropriate pedagogies and ICT capabilities are employed, and that the face-to-face component is sufficient in the context of each specific course. The Committee notes that the Australian Government's establishment of the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency presents a timely opportunity for course accreditation, standards and quality assurance mechanisms to be strengthened.

Blended learning and the student experience

The nature of the student experience was another quality issue that attracted comment throughout the inquiry. Some participants, particularly from the higher education sector, argued that students at university centres and small campuses do not benefit from the broader experiences, facilities and services available at large campuses. Professor Elizabeth Harman, Vice-Chancellor, Victoria University, argued that students at the university's small Sunbury and Melton campuses were not benefiting from what she termed a 'genuine university experience'.⁸⁰⁴ Professor Sally Walker, Vice-Chancellor, Deakin University, made a similar point in arguing against the Review of Australian Higher Education's emphasis on non-campus approaches to regional higher education delivery:

My personal view is that Professor Bradley does not have an answer in relation to regional provision, that she is searching and that some of the things that she has currently come up with are absolutely undesirable.

For example, she spoke at the Universities Australia conference of fly-in, fly-out tertiary provision. If a group of nurses at Wonthaggi wanted to upskill, you would go in on one day a week and upskill them. That is not a tertiary experience; it is something different. It is not regional provision. It makes a mockery of what is true regional provision ... There may be a case for providing opportunities for the nurses at Warragul or wherever they may be, but to equate it with an authentic regional campus is an insult.⁸⁰⁵

During meetings in Perth, Professor Alan Robson, Vice-Chancellor, University of Western Australia, argued that because the student experience in regional areas is of lower quality, financial support for relocation is a much better approach.⁸⁰⁶

⁸⁰⁴ Professor E. Harman, Vice-Chancellor, Victoria University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 30 March 2009, 4.

⁸⁰⁵ Professor S. Walker, Vice-Chancellor, Deakin University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 30 March 2009, 24–25.

⁸⁰⁶ Professor A. Robson, Vice-Chancellor, University of Western Australia, Meeting with representatives of Curtin University of Technology, Edith Cowan University and the University of Western Australia, Perth, 30 April 2009.

The differences between the student experience on a metropolitan or large campus, and at a university centre, were acknowledged by a range of stakeholders throughout the inquiry. In Geraldton, the Committee heard that the Geraldton Universities Centre does not aim to recreate what exists in the city, or to pretend that the student experience is equivalent. At the same time, the director of the centre emphasised that what is provided for students is a study environment where students feel comfortable and supported.⁸⁰⁷ Students themselves indicated that the opportunity to study in a comfortable non-metropolitan environment, to maintain existing social support networks, and to experience more personal assistance from academic and support staff was of greater importance to them than the opportunity to experience campus life at a large university.⁸⁰⁸ One student at the Geraldton Universities Centre told the Committee that she had begun her studies in Perth, but ‘hated it’, and has enjoyed her experience at the Geraldton Universities Centre much more.

Clearly, there are substantial differences between the student experience at large campuses and university centres. Nonetheless, just as off-campus study enhances access for a specific cohort of students, university centres can also be important in filling gaps in higher education provision. The Committee therefore believes that where university centres and similar facilities exist, it is important that the features, benefits and drawbacks of study at that location are made explicit to prospective students. This point was emphasised by Dr Kerry Ferguson, Pro Vice-Chancellor, Equity and Student Services, La Trobe University:

... you are back at looking at what do we expect and what would a student expect to experience on a campus. That is a question that we have to answer. Otherwise we have to be quite clear about what we are marketing and what we are delivering. If it is a location, we have to really say that all you are going to get here is the delivery and that we will support you as best we can, but there will not be a whole range of things that make up the student experience at university.⁸⁰⁹

Such an approach should enable students to choose the option that best suits them.

The Committee does not believe that a ‘different’ student experience is necessarily a lower quality experience. While universities tend to be concerned with the broader student experience, this is a luxury that is not open to many regional people (particularly mature age people) who will not experience higher education unless it is available locally. While it is obviously important that students at university centres receive a high quality education, experiencing the extra-curricular trappings of a large campus is not necessarily a priority consideration for these students.

Cost effectiveness of blended learning

The Committee did not receive any definitive evidence about the costs of higher education delivery at university centres, or the costs of blended delivery in comparison to traditional on-campus delivery. The Committee was advised that RMIT University’s research and learning centre in Hamilton runs at a loss,⁸¹⁰ but heard conflicting views about the cost of provision at the Geraldton Universities Centre. One inquiry participant noted that while there have been several attempts to identify course costs in Australia, clear estimates have been ‘elusive’.⁸¹¹ In the absence of this data, the Committee cautions against any *prima facie*

⁸⁰⁷ Ms M. Wills, Director, Geraldton Universities Centre, Meeting with representatives of the Geraldton Universities Centre, Geraldton, 28 April 2009.

⁸⁰⁸ Meeting with students of the Geraldton Universities Centre, Geraldton, 29 April 2009.

⁸⁰⁹ Dr K. Ferguson, Pro Vice-Chancellor, Equity and Student Services, La Trobe University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 30 March 2009, 24.

⁸¹⁰ Dr L. Wheeler, Head, Learning Community Partnerships, RMIT University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Hamilton, 28 April 2008, 52.

⁸¹¹ Mr L. Money, Shelley (Western Australia), Written Submission, August 2008, 3.

assumptions that delivery at university centres rather than campuses, even where blended learning is used, is likely to be a more cost effective way of delivering higher education in regional areas. This point was emphasised by a representative of the National Tertiary Education Union (Victorian Division), who argued that the resources for infrastructure, curriculum development and IT support may mean that high quality blended learning may in fact be more expensive than traditional delivery modes.⁸¹² The Committee believes that developing a clearer understanding of the costs of different models for regional higher education provision should be an important component of Australian Government policy and planning for regional delivery.

TAFE delivery of higher education

Another flexible approach to regional higher education provision is the delivery of courses by TAFE institutes on behalf of a partner university. As with university centres, this approach to regional provision appears to be more suited to smaller regional communities that are at a distance from larger providers. In such arrangements, the university designs and accredits the higher education program, which is delivered by TAFE staff at TAFE facilities.

Current TAFE delivery of higher education

TAFE delivery of higher education programs has a long history. In Victoria's north-west, for example, the Sunraysia Institute of TAFE began delivering higher education courses in the 1980s in partnership with former Colleges of Advanced Education, and later, as a partner of La Trobe University.⁸¹³ Today, the Institute shares facilities and works closely with La Trobe University's Mildura campus.

While some metropolitan TAFE institutes offer a small number of degree level courses in their own right, the Committee is aware of only one Victorian university currently offering higher education degrees through a TAFE partnership. RMIT University, itself a dual-sector institution, offers a Bachelor of Commerce in Bairnsdale and a Bachelor of Nursing in Sale, delivered by the East Gippsland Institute of TAFE. The Bachelor of Commerce is delivered through face-to-face classes supported with online resources. The degree also includes compulsory work integrated learning units, supported by a local business mentor.⁸¹⁴ Nursing students at Sale participate in flexible learning that includes online, face-to-face, videoconferencing and laboratory experiences.⁸¹⁵

In addition to the TAFE delivery of higher education programs already occurring, additional collaborations between universities and TAFE institutes are emerging. In recent years, Deakin University has been considering ways to further extend higher education provision to rural and regional areas.⁸¹⁶ In 2008, the university was awarded \$8.21 million from the Australian Government's Diversity and Structural Adjustment Fund for the innovative project, Deakin at your Doorstep. Through Deakin at your Doorstep, the university's

⁸¹² Ms R. May, Industrial Officer, National Tertiary Education Union (Victorian Division), Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 14 April 2008, 26–27.

⁸¹³ Sunraysia Institute of TAFE, Written Submission, March 2008, 4.

⁸¹⁴ East Gippsland Institute of TAFE, 'Bachelor of Commerce – RMIT,' East Gippsland Institute of TAFE, <http://www.egtafe.vic.edu.au/apps/coursenavigator/course.asp?courseid=472> (accessed 14 January 2009); RMIT University, 'Commerce – Bachelor of Commerce,' RMIT University, <http://rmit.org.au/browse:ID=BP181> (accessed 18 January 2009).

⁸¹⁵ RMIT University, 'Nursing – Bachelor of Nursing,' RMIT University, <http://www.rmit.edu.au/programs/bp032> (accessed 18 January 2009).

⁸¹⁶ Dr J. Henry, Board Member, Smart Geelong Region LLEN, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Colac, 29 April 2008, 17, 20.

Warrnambool campus is developing a two-year associate degree program for students in regional and remote areas. The associate degree will be delivered using leading edge technology, and in partnership with TAFE institutes.⁸¹⁷

As noted, Swan Hill has been selected as the first site for Deakin at your Doorstep. The initiative will give students in the region the opportunity to undertake two-year associate degrees in accounting, community work and children's services, delivered in a blended learning mode. Courses will be delivered in conjunction with Sunraysia Institute of TAFE. On completion, graduates will have attained both the associate degree and a TAFE diploma, with the opportunity to complete the remainder of a full bachelor degree at Deakin University.⁸¹⁸

The Committee also heard that TAFE institutes in Western Australia have historically had an important role delivering higher education through partnerships under the 'country contracting' model.⁸¹⁹ In this model, TAFE institutes were encouraged to 'contract' with universities to deliver higher education programs, with modest financial and organisational support provided by the Western Australian Government. In Geraldton, the Committee heard that Central West TAFE had a strong role in higher education delivery in the community prior to the establishment of the Geraldton Universities Centre. Today, Central West TAFE continues to deliver a Bachelor of Nursing in partnership with Edith Cowan University.

Quality and cost effectiveness of TAFE delivery of higher education

The Committee heard that TAFE delivery of higher education programs can be an effective model for smaller regional communities. The East Gippsland Institute of TAFE noted that the benefits of its partnership with RMIT University include the opportunity for students to stay in the local area while obtaining a degree from a world-recognised university. The qualifications are portable and have 'instant recognition and credibility', while graduates also develop an appreciation of the rural business environment.⁸²⁰ These models can be attractive to TAFE institutes because they may add to the prestige of the institution, as well as providing impetus for the development of articulation pathways from their VET programs.⁸²¹ Finally, because TAFE delivery of higher education utilises existing facilities and staff skills, it can mean that resources are used more efficiently, reducing the costs of regional provision.⁸²² It can also mean that higher education students have access to better learning resources. For example, one student at the Geraldton Universities Centre noted that computer facilities at the TAFE campus were better than those that the centre was able to provide.⁸²³

Echoing some of the concerns about the quality of provision at university centres, the East Gippsland Institute of TAFE claimed that one drawback in TAFE delivery of higher education programs is the lack of access to support services from the partner university, contributing to a lack of understanding of student needs and a lack of connection between students and

⁸¹⁷ Deakin University, 'Deakin at your Doorstep – new Associate Degree program: Major Boost for Deakin's Warrnambool Campus,' Media Release, 12 December 2008; Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, *Diversity and Structural Adjustment Fund: 2008 Funding Round* (Canberra: DEEWR, 2008), 2.

⁸¹⁸ Elise Snashall-Woodhams, 'Record Tertiary Access,' *The Guardian* (Swan Hill), 3 June 2009, 3.

⁸¹⁹ Mr L. Money, Shelley (Western Australia), Written Submission, August 2008, 9.

⁸²⁰ East Gippsland Institute of TAFE, Supplementary Submission, March 2008, 2.

⁸²¹ Mr L. Money, Shelley (Western Australia), Written Submission, August 2008, 9.

⁸²² *ibid.*

⁸²³ Ms C. Lynch, Undergraduate Student, Bachelor of Creative Industries, Edith Cowan University, Meeting with students of the Geraldton Universities Centre, Geraldton, 29 April 2009.

the university. It argued that improved provision would incorporate more visits from university staff.⁸²⁴

On the other hand, Wellington Shire Council provided the Committee with the story of one graduate who had completed the RMIT University Bachelor of Nursing delivered via a TAFE partnership in Sale, and who had a very positive experience.⁸²⁵ Despite initial doubts about the quality of the course, the student found that it was well organised, and that tutor-student ratios were favourable, meaning that students were actively coached and nurtured throughout their studies. Students in the course enjoyed organised study groups, individual coaching, and access to remedial assistance in mathematics and biology from local schoolteachers. There were also opportunities for voluntary work, additional practicums and field trips.⁸²⁶ This anecdote illustrates that while higher education courses delivered by TAFE institutes are likely to suffer from perceptions of lower status and quality, they may in fact provide students with advantages, such as small class sizes, that are of great educational benefit.

Increasing collaboration in regional delivery of higher education

The Committee also heard that there may be potential for greater collaboration between sectors in the delivery of higher education in regional areas. In particular, participants argued that TAFE skills and infrastructure could be used more extensively for the delivery of higher education programs in rural and regional areas.⁸²⁷ The Committee agrees that there is scope for collaborative models to expand the provision of higher education throughout Victoria.

Whilst in Scotland, the Committee learned about the UHI Millennium Institute, a particularly developed example of a delivery partnership involving both vocational and higher education.⁸²⁸ The UHI Millennium Institute is a partnership of colleges and learning and research centres working together to provide university level education to people throughout the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, and beyond. The UHI Millennium Institute's mission is:

To be a distinctive and innovative regional university of national and international significance; a university with a pivotal role in the education, economic, social, cultural and environmental infrastructure of its region and which reaches out to the people of the Highlands and Islands and the rest of the world through its research and teaching.⁸²⁹

The Institute has thirteen partners, including further education colleges, specialist colleges and research institutions. Each academic partner has its own character and contributes to the distinctive organisation that is the UHI Millennium Institute. Some are relatively large colleges in urban centres, while others are smaller institutions, including some whose primary focus is on research. The partnership allows even tiny colleges to offer all levels of the qualifications framework, from access courses through to PhD studies. Since August 2008, the UHI Millennium Institute has been able to award its own taught degrees, a major step in the path towards gaining full university status. Some degrees will continue to be

⁸²⁴ East Gippsland Institute of TAFE, Supplementary Submission, March 2008, 2.

⁸²⁵ Wellington Shire Council, Appendix to Written Submission, March 2008, 7–9.

⁸²⁶ *ibid.*

⁸²⁷ Ms M. Kirsopp, Parent, Haven, Written Submission, May 2008, 3; Mr B. Graham, Director, Strategic Development, Wellington Shire Council, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Bairnsdale, 20 May 2008, 3; Chisholm Institute of TAFE, Written Submission, March 2008, 6.

⁸²⁸ Meeting with Professor R. J. Cormack, Principal, UHI Millennium Institute, Edinburgh, 28 August 2008.

⁸²⁹ Presentation by Professor R. J. Cormack, Principal, UHI Millennium Institute, Edinburgh, 28 August 2008.

awarded by the University of Aberdeen, University of Strathclyde, the Open University and others.⁸³⁰

The Committee recognises that establishing and maintaining effective delivery partnerships can be time consuming and complex. In Australia, this process is complicated by regulatory complexity in the VET and higher education sectors. However, the Committee expects that government moves to improve articulation and connectivity across the tertiary education system may enhance opportunities for collaboration in regional higher education provision. The Committee believes that the UHI Millennium Institute is an excellent example of the benefits of effective collaboration between education and training providers and researchers in non-metropolitan areas.

Conclusion and recommendations

The assumption is sometimes made that geographical differences in participation in higher education stem almost entirely from varying provision in different areas. While such an assumption is simplistic, the Committee found that provision and access are indeed important. The provision of higher education in regional locations, while not appealing to all prospective students, creates participation opportunities. Many of those studying regionally come from low socioeconomic status backgrounds or other designated equity groups. A proportion would never attend university without access to local opportunities. The Committee therefore believes that regional provision forms part of the foundation for meeting participation targets for under-represented groups. Regional provision should involve a combination of delivery models, matched to the particular contexts within metropolitan, outer urban, regional and rural communities.

The Committee believes that sustaining and strengthening existing regional campuses in Victoria should be a priority. The Committee believes that, supported with appropriate Australian Government funding, these campuses have the capacity to continue to provide educational opportunities while making an important contribution to economic and social wellbeing in regional communities. The Committee also sees a role for the Victorian Government to boost universities' contributions to regional development, particularly through the provision of detailed information on local skills needs.

The Committee believes that university centres can be an effective model for regional higher education provision, where they are carefully planned, appropriately funded, and where quality oversight is in place. Also essential is active support from the host communities and a strong, ongoing commitment from providers. Where communities have a strong interest in university centre models, there should be mechanisms to work with the Australian Government to examine the feasibility of establishing a centre locally. While such centres should not be expected to offer the same experience of student life as larger campuses, the Committee believes that they have the capacity to offer a high quality education. When blended learning is employed, this should be of high quality and include an adequate amount of face-to-face interaction.

The Committee also believes that TAFE delivery of higher education courses has a number of advantages as a model of higher education provision in Victoria's smaller rural communities. In particular, the use of TAFE staff and facilities may be a more efficient use of resources than the creation of new facilities. The Committee therefore believes that the

⁸³⁰ Meeting with Professor R. J. Cormack, Principal, UHI Millennium Institute, Edinburgh, 28 August 2008.

Victorian and Australian governments should work together to support universities and TAFE institutes to partner in the delivery of higher education courses.

Quality and resources are important and related themes, irrespective of the specific approach to provision. Delivery of higher education in regional areas will often cost more than metropolitan delivery. Nevertheless, the Committee believes it is important that regional provision is adequately funded. The Committee therefore recognises a need for clearer information about the actual costs of different approaches to regional delivery.

The Committee strongly believes that higher education must be both accessible and of high quality. To ensure that quality is maintained, higher education accreditation and quality assurance needs to pay specific attention to different delivery modes and locations, particularly where new approaches are being implemented. Related to this, the Committee sees the need for a major review of the provision of blended learning by the higher education sector. This review should benchmark best practice, and set mandatory guidelines for future delivery in this mode.

Recommendations

6.1 That the Victorian Government advocate for Australian Government funding for regional higher education provision that:

- is based on the actual cost of provision in different rural and regional locations;
- is directed in large part at maintaining and strengthening existing regional campuses;
- supports expansion of collaborative regional delivery arrangements between universities for high quality higher education courses and increased research capacity;
- utilises existing facilities and resources (including TAFE institutes) in rural and regional areas, where appropriate;
- provides incentives for universities to offer high value courses that balance student demand and workforce need; and
- is sufficient to ensure a high quality face-to-face component in undergraduate courses delivered through blended learning.

6.2 That the Victorian Government advocate to the Australian Government that it ensure that accreditation and quality assurance of higher education courses address each mode and site of delivery.

- 6.3 That the Victorian Government advocate through the new Ministerial Council for Tertiary Education and Employment for a major review by the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency of the provision of blended learning by the higher education sector, to benchmark best practice and set mandatory quality guidelines for future delivery in this mode.
- 6.4 That Skills Victoria work with regional universities and campuses to provide annual detailed advice on local skill shortages in regional Victoria.
- 6.5 That as part of the Victorian Government’s ongoing commitment to improving public transport, it review public transport services to education and training institutions in non-metropolitan areas. This review should include consideration of public transport linkages within and between non-metropolitan localities.
- 6.6 That the Victorian Government support TAFE institutes to collaborate and partner with universities in the delivery of higher education courses in regional Victoria.

