

# Transition and completion

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Probably what struck us most was something that one of our parents said. She said that city children are much better prepared and just had to take a small step to tertiary education; however, the transition for the country student is not a skip but a bloody long jump.<sup>1033</sup>

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After the long journey to enrolment, students must make a successful transition to university and complete their studies if they are to enjoy the full benefits of participation in higher education. According to OECD estimates, 69 per cent of Australian students enrolling in an undergraduate degree can be expected to complete a course.<sup>1034</sup> The completion rate for those beginning undergraduate studies as a current or recent school leaver is estimated to be slightly higher.<sup>1035</sup>

Completion of university rests on successful adjustment to the academic and social environment of university, and for some, adjustment to a new living environment and lifestyle. Following these adjustments, students need sustained commitment for the duration of a course of study. While the transition to university is often highly anticipated and enjoyable, it can also be challenging. The Committee found that students from some geographical areas and from low socioeconomic backgrounds can face additional difficulties in making the transition to higher education and in continuing their studies through to completion. Therefore, a key focus of the Committee's investigations was student services and programs aimed at supporting the retention and course completion of higher education students.

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## Transition to university

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The transition to higher education is a period of change during which all first-time students must adapt to the academic, cultural and social environment of university. These are adjustments that students make with different levels of ease and success and at an individual pace.

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<sup>1033</sup> Ms P. Nunan, Principal, Werrimull P-12 School, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Ouyen, 3 June 2008, 48.

<sup>1034</sup> Gary N. Marks, *Completing University: Characteristics and Outcomes of Completing and Non-completing Students*, Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth Research Report 51 (Camberwell: Australian Council for Educational Research, 2007), 2.

<sup>1035</sup> *ibid.*, 17.

The Committee heard that students may feel intimidated, unwelcome or uncomfortable at university.<sup>1036</sup> Mr Tony Edwards, Project Manager, Access and Success, Victoria University, provided a poignant account of how students may be overwhelmed by the university environment:

... the careers teacher [received] a phone call from a young man who was at RMIT. He had got into RMIT on a fairly decent score of about 79. He was standing outside RMIT almost in tears saying, 'I cannot cope with all of this'. He was clearly dropped into the deep end in terms of social and cultural capital, even though he may have had the educational capital.<sup>1037</sup>

Other participants suggested that adjustment difficulties can contribute to lack of confidence, anxiety or depression, and can increase the risk that the student will drop out of university without completing their studies.<sup>1038</sup> Three key aspects of the transition to university were identified that may affect students' chances of success: academic, living and social environments.

### **Academic transition**

In making the transition to higher education, first-time students must adjust to the academic environment at university. New students need to develop an understanding of university administrative procedures and jargon, as well as the conventions of academic study.<sup>1039</sup> Crucially, most higher education institutions expect students to be self-directed learners. Students must therefore adopt a relatively independent learning style that may differ sharply from the secondary school learning experience.<sup>1040</sup>

While this transition is common to all commencing students, some participants suggested that the shift can be greater for students from particular areas or backgrounds. The Committee heard that the transition to university study can be challenging for students from smaller schools, especially in non-metropolitan areas. Ms Chelsea Manley, Year 12 Student, Ouyen Secondary College, told the Committee that she anticipated feeling 'extremely uncomfortable and intimidated' in large university classes after attending a school with very small classes and extensive individual support from teachers.<sup>1041</sup> A number of other students from Ouyen Secondary College expressed similar concerns about this adjustment. Other participants commented that there may be a cultural gulf between a large, metropolitan institution and the local school and community environment.<sup>1042</sup> Some parents and teachers added that high-achieving rural students, who are often highly visible and well

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<sup>1036</sup> Mrs J. de Freitas, Parent and Teacher, Alexandra, Written Submission, May 2008, 1; Dr J. Oriel, Head, Student Equity Unit, Deakin University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Colac, 29 April 2008, 53.

<sup>1037</sup> Mr T. Edwards, Project Manager, Access and Success, Victoria University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Sunshine, 12 August 2008, 23.

<sup>1038</sup> Ms M. Weiss, Student Counsellor, Counselling Service, Parent Information Program, Victoria University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Sunshine, 12 August 2008, 30; Southern Grampians Youth Network, Written Submission, April 2008, 2; Bendigo Senior Secondary College, Written Submission, March 2008, 5; Ms H. Rawlings, Bairnsdale, Written Submission, March 2008, 1; Mallee Family Care, Written Submission, March 2008, 12; Mrs V. Draper, Parent, Eildon, Written Submission, May 2008, 1; Ms H. Sobey, Parent, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Hamilton, 28 April 2008, 65.

<sup>1039</sup> Ms M. Weiss, Student Counsellor, Counselling Service, Parent Information Program, Victoria University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Sunshine, 12 August 2008, 30.

<sup>1040</sup> Bendigo Student Association, Bendigo Campus, La Trobe University, Written Submission, April 2008, 4; Mr K. Farrell, Executive Director, Mildura Campus, La Trobe University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Robinvale, 2 June 2008, 46.

<sup>1041</sup> Ms C. Manley, Year 12 Student, Ouyen Secondary College, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Ouyen, 3 June 2008, 14.

<sup>1042</sup> Dr J. Oriel, Head, Student Equity Unit, Deakin University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Colac, 29 April 2008, 53; The University of Melbourne, Written Submission, March 2008, 7; Mrs J. de Freitas, Parent and Teacher, Alexandra, Written Submission, May 2008, 1.

supported in their communities, can have particular difficulty adjusting to an environment where they are one of many such students.<sup>1043</sup>

Other participants suggested that students from lower socioeconomic status backgrounds who are the first in their family to attend university may also have difficulty adjusting to the changed academic environment. These students may have less knowledge of what to expect at university,<sup>1044</sup> and their family members may be less able to assist with study tasks and may have a misunderstanding of the amount of time required for study.<sup>1045</sup> Research supports the argument that the academic transition can be somewhat less smooth for students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds. Students from this group are more likely to report difficulty adjusting to the style of teaching at university and in comprehending study material.<sup>1046</sup>

Despite these concerns, research and data suggests that the difficulties experienced by some student groups in adjusting to university do not adversely affect their academic results. Based on a large survey of domestic undergraduate Australian students, one study found that students from rural backgrounds were in fact more positive than metropolitan students about their experience of university, reporting less uncertainty about their academic progress and less fear of failure.<sup>1047</sup> They were also more positive about the quality of teaching, expressed fewer concerns about workload and showed 'greater signs of engagement and overall satisfaction'.<sup>1048</sup> As discussed in Chapter 2, Australian Government equity performance indicators suggest that students from rural and regional backgrounds are actually more likely to pass enrolled units than their peers, while students from remote areas pass units at rates that approach or equal the average.

Equity performance indicators suggest slightly lower academic performance for low socioeconomic status students, with the success ratio remaining steady at 0.97 during the years 2002 to 2006 for Victorian students under 25 years of age.<sup>1049</sup> Nevertheless, Professor Richard James, Director, Centre for the Study of Higher Education, The University of Melbourne, told the Committee that the current differences are small and 'probably not relevant for policy purposes'.<sup>1050</sup> Similarly, the chief executive officer of Universities Australia told the Committee that students from lower socioeconomic status backgrounds experience roughly comparable academic success in their first year of study. He added, however, that the quality of the learning experience for these students tends to be somewhat lower, as they often feel less comfortable in the university environment.<sup>1051</sup>

<sup>1043</sup> Mrs H. Thiele, Principal, Murrayville Community College, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Ouyen, 3 June 2008, 48; Southern Grampians Youth Network, Written Submission, April 2008, 2.

<sup>1044</sup> Ms M. Weiss, Student Counsellor, Counselling Service, Parent Information Program, Victoria University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Sunshine, 12 August 2008, 30; Bendigo Student Association, Bendigo Campus, La Trobe University, Written Submission, April 2008, 4.

<sup>1045</sup> Ms M. Weiss, Student Counsellor, Counselling Service, Parent Information Program, Victoria University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Sunshine, 12 August 2008, 30.

<sup>1046</sup> Kerri-Lee Krause and others, *The First Year Experience in Australian Universities: Findings from a Decade of National Studies* (Canberra: Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training, 2005), 69.

<sup>1047</sup> *ibid.*, 70.

<sup>1048</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>1049</sup> Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, *Victoria Equity Performance Indicators 2002 to 2006* (Canberra: DEEWR, 2006).

<sup>1050</sup> Professor R. James, Director, Centre for the Study of Higher Education, The University of Melbourne, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 3 March 2008, 10.

<sup>1051</sup> Dr G. Withers, Chief Executive Officer, Universities Australia, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Canberra, 17 June 2008, 12.

## Living environment

In addition to the academic changes experienced by all students, the Committee heard about further changes faced by students relocating from rural and remote areas. Many young people who relocate to study experience independent living for the first time.<sup>1052</sup> Submissions from parents, in particular, emphasised that young students move from a comfortable home environment to one where they 'have to fend for themselves',<sup>1053</sup> attending to shopping, meal preparation, cleaning and budgeting, as well as more stressful tasks such as finding accommodation.<sup>1054</sup> Some students may not slip into this new role comfortably, and can find the adjustment difficult without family support.<sup>1055</sup> One youth worker suggested that this transition to independent living may be most challenging for high-achieving students, who have often benefited from a very supportive home environment during secondary school.<sup>1056</sup>

As highlighted by many participants from rural, regional and outer urban areas, university students relocating for study need to adjust to a new setting and lifestyle vastly different from what they have previously experienced in small communities. For a number of students, the Committee heard that this change to the 'bright lights' of the city is keenly anticipated.<sup>1057</sup> For others, particularly those with little or no prior experience in large cities, contemplating a move to this unfamiliar environment can be daunting, even 'scary'.<sup>1058</sup>

The Committee heard that prospective students from more remote areas are likely to be most affected by such concerns.<sup>1059</sup> Ms Hilary Thiele, Principal, Murrayville Community College, told the Committee that for students from her small community in north-west Victoria this cultural step was probably the most significant barrier to further study:

... there is a lack of connection when you are living in a tiny little town to what is out there. The challenge is that when you go away to university you have got to go into a culture that is totally different from what you are used to. I believe that if you asked a city kid to spend the three years after they left secondary education in the country, they would not be able to do it either. It is just a cultural thing, but the thing that is being asked of rural kids is that huge jump into a totally different culture.<sup>1060</sup>

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<sup>1052</sup> Ms K. Conabere, Parent, Traralgon, Written Submission, February 2008, 1; The University of Melbourne, Written Submission, March 2008, 7; Mrs J. Dowlin, Parent, Warrnambool, Written Submission, April 2008, 1; Mr N. and Mrs W. O'Brien, Parents, Wodonga, Written Submission, April 2008, 3; Mrs J. de Freitas, Parent and Teacher, Alexandra, Written Submission, May 2008, 1; Cr V. Knight, Deputy Mayor, Mildura Rural City Council, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Ouyen, 3 June 2008, 30.

<sup>1053</sup> Mrs J. Dowlin, Parent, Warrnambool, Written Submission, April 2008, 1.

<sup>1054</sup> Mrs M. Hein, Parent, Portland, Written Submission, April 2008, 1; Ms M. Barton, Parent, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Bairnsdale, 20 May 2008, 26; Ms A. Trickey, Executive Officer, Careers Connection, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Benalla, 3 March 2009, 25.

<sup>1055</sup> Ms K. Conabere, Parent, Traralgon, Written Submission, February 2008, 1; Mrs J. de Freitas, Parent and Teacher, Alexandra, Written Submission, May 2008, 1.

<sup>1056</sup> Ms L. Bartlett, Regional Youth Affairs Consultant, Barwon Adolescent Task Force, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Colac, 29 April 2008, 38.

<sup>1057</sup> Ms H. Barry, School Captain and Year 12 Student and Ms E. McKenzie, Year 12 Student, Bairnsdale Secondary College, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Bairnsdale, 20 May 2008, 49–50; Ms C. Manley, Year 12 Student, Ouyen Secondary College, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Ouyen, 3 June 2008, 14; Ms D. Howcroft, Parent, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Hamilton, 28 April 2008, 64.

<sup>1058</sup> For example, Mr B. Gregg and Ms S. Wills, Year 11 Students, Ouyen Secondary College, Written Submissions, April 2008; Equity and Access Unit, La Trobe University, Written Submission, April 2008, 7, 10; South West LLEN, Written Submission, April 2008, 6; Mrs J. de Freitas, Parent and Teacher, Alexandra, Written Submission, May 2008, 1; Youth Affairs Council of Victoria, Written Submission, April 2008, 13–14; Mr B. Simons, Principal, The Hamilton and Alexandra College, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Hamilton, 28 April 2008, 16; Ms M. Barton, Parent, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Bairnsdale, 20 May 2008, 29; Ms F. Harley, Manager, Chances for Children, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Robinvale, 2 June 2008, 27; Ms A. Trickey, Executive Officer, Careers Connection, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Benalla, 3 March 2009, 25.

<sup>1059</sup> Mr R. Boucher, Principal, Swifts Creek Secondary College, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Bairnsdale, 20 May 2008, 44.

<sup>1060</sup> Mrs H. Thiele, Principal, Murrayville Community College, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Ouyen, 3 June 2008, 48.

Several participants commented on the need for young people to develop an understanding of the 'basics of living in the city', such as how to use the public transport system with which they may have no prior experience and which can seem like 'a frustrating mystery'.<sup>1061</sup> Security and safety in a metropolitan environment, especially in Melbourne, can also be a concern for some prospective students and their families.<sup>1062</sup>

### Social connectedness

Another dimension of relocation is that students from rural and regional areas must move away from family, friends and the community. Participants told the Committee that the anticipated or actual loss of these social networks can be difficult and overwhelming for some young people.<sup>1063</sup> Some participants suggested that isolation from these social networks may also affect a young person's sense of identity or their capacity for resilience in times of stress.<sup>1064</sup> During a potentially difficult period of adjustment to university study, relocated students have less access to assistance and emotional support from loved ones and the broader community.<sup>1065</sup>

The Committee heard that this experience of isolation can stand in particularly sharp contrast to the experience of life in a rural area. Ms Tam Linsen, a parent from the small community of W Tree in East Gippsland, described the difference:

Our children are raised in a very idyllic lifestyle, it is a beautiful area, it is very supportive. All the families are a community. We all look after each other's children; we are a very strong community in that regard. And the kids go off to Melbourne and they just fall apart. They get there and there is no support. They cannot just drop next door for some advice. There is no-one there for them.<sup>1066</sup>

The particular 'feeling of connectedness' and mutual support in many rural communities was also highlighted by other inquiry participants. Ms Sue Oakley, Assistant Principal, Benalla College, even wondered whether country communities in some way do young people a disservice by creating a strong sense of community, recognition and support—a sense that is lost when students relocate.<sup>1067</sup>

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<sup>1061</sup> For example, Mrs J. de Freitas, Parent and Teacher, Alexandra, Written Submission, May 2008, 1; Mrs J. Dowlin, Parent, Warrnambool, Written Submission, April 2008, 1; Ms K. Conabere, Parent, Traralgon, Written Submission, February 2008, 2; Ms H. Sobey, Parent, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Hamilton, 28 April 2008, 64; Mrs J. Boyle, Principal, Mortlake P-12 College, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Colac, 29 April 2008, 32; Ms F. Harley, Manager, Chances for Children, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Robinvale, 2 June 2008, 27.

<sup>1062</sup> Southern Grampians Youth Network, Written Submission, April 2008, 2; Ms D. Howcroft, Parent, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Hamilton, 28 April 2008, 63; South West LLEN, Written Submission, April 2008, 6; Deakin University, Written Submission, March 2008, 12; Ms S. Connelly, Koorie Educator, Swan Hill North Primary School, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Robinvale, 2 June 2008, 56.

<sup>1063</sup> Mr J. Heppell and Ms M. Gordon, School Captains, Leongatha Secondary College, Written Submission, March 2008, 1; Rural City of Wangaratta, Written Submission, May 2008, 3; Ms J. Edwards, Manager, Equity and Disability Support Services, Swinburne University of Technology, Written Submission, March 2008, 3; Mrs J. de Freitas, Parent and Teacher, Alexandra, Written Submission, May 2008, 1.

<sup>1064</sup> Gippsland Local Government Network, Written Submission, April 2008, 4; Ms D. Howcroft, Parent, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Hamilton, 28 April 2008, 63.

<sup>1065</sup> Ms R. Kava, Chief Executive Officer, Gannawarra Shire Council, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Robinvale, 2 June 2008, 3; Ms M. Barton, Parent, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Bairnsdale, 20 May 2008, 26; Youth Affairs Council of Victoria, Written Submission, April 2008, 13–14; Ms J. McGinness-Whyte, Parent, Portarlington, Written Submission, May 2008, 1; Ms D. Howcroft, Parent, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Hamilton, 28 April 2008, 63; Mr K. Farrell, Executive Director, Mildura Campus, La Trobe University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Robinvale, 2 June 2008, 47; Ms H. Sobey, Parent, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Hamilton, 28 April 2008, 65.

<sup>1066</sup> Ms T. Linsen, Parent, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Bairnsdale, 20 May 2008, 25.

<sup>1067</sup> Mrs S. Oakley, Assistant Principal and VET Coordinator, Senior School, Benalla College, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Benalla, 3 March 2009, 13–14.

The Committee heard that students adjust to this loss of social connection in different ways. One approach is to visit home frequently in order to maintain contact with known social networks.<sup>1068</sup> For some students, however, this may be complicated due to study and work requirements or travel times and costs.<sup>1069</sup> This approach also has the potential to delay the formation of new social networks, thereby prolonging the period of transition.<sup>1070</sup>

As well as maintaining existing social networks, most students who move away for university will need to form new relationships. While this is an important part of the transition process for all school leavers beginning university,<sup>1071</sup> it is of even greater importance for relocated students.<sup>1072</sup> The Committee heard that this process can be difficult or slow for some students.<sup>1073</sup> While metropolitan students often attend university with friends from secondary school, and international students frequently form connections with others from their home country, for rural students 'there is often no natural or easily identifiable cohort to join'.<sup>1074</sup> It was widely thought that, lacking a support network, regional students are at greater risk of experiencing loneliness, anxiety or depression at university, impacting on health and wellbeing and persistence and success in their studies.<sup>1075</sup> The University of Melbourne noted that students from rural and remote areas who attended the university's counselling service, compared to all users of the service, tended to be younger, attend more sessions of counselling, and were more likely to be suffering from anxiety or depression.<sup>1076</sup>

Despite these challenges, the Committee heard that most students who relocate to a metropolitan area for study are successful in forming new social networks.<sup>1077</sup> Two students who moved from regional Victoria to study at the Australian National University in Canberra suggested that the transition becomes easier over time. Both students described to the Committee their initial experiences of homesickness and considering a return to Victoria. After this difficult period of adjustment, however, they had made new friends and become aware of the support available.<sup>1078</sup> One noted that 'if you can last the first bit, then you are okay'.<sup>1079</sup>

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<sup>1068</sup> Mr P. Brown, Executive Officer, Country Education Project, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 25 February 2008, 27.

<sup>1069</sup> Ms C. Timpano, Student, Bendigo Campus, La Trobe University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Robinvale, 2 June 2008, 27; Ms D. Howcroft, Parent, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Hamilton, 28 April 2008, 62; Mr M. Goldsworthy, Acting Principal, Ouyen Secondary College, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Ouyen, 3 June 2008, 2.

<sup>1070</sup> The University of Melbourne, Written Submission, March 2008, 6.

<sup>1071</sup> Supplementary information provided by RMIT University, March 2009; Tanya Kantanis, 'The role of social transition in students' adjustment to the first year of university,' *Journal of Institutional Research* 9, no. 1 (2000): 102–103.

<sup>1072</sup> Mr T. Ballard, Recent School Leaver, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 14 April 2008, 11; Mr K. Farrell, Executive Director, Mildura Campus, La Trobe University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Robinvale, 2 June 2008, 46–47; Ms M. Levy, VCE Graduate 2008 and Sport and Recreation Trainee, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Benalla, 3 March 2009, 6.

<sup>1073</sup> Frankston Learning City Stakeholder Network, Written Submission, March 2008, 3; Mr G. and Mrs L. Code, Parents, Aberfeldy, Written Submission, May 2008, 1–2; Mr J. Ireland, Coordinator, School Focused Youth Service, Gippsland Lakes Community Health, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Bairnsdale, 20 May 2008, 18; The University of Melbourne, Written Submission, March 2008, 6.

<sup>1074</sup> The University of Melbourne, Written Submission, March 2008, 6.

<sup>1075</sup> Southern Grampians Youth Network, Written Submission, April 2008, 2; South West Association of Post Primary Principals, Written Submission, April 2008, 7; Rural City of Wangaratta, Written Submission, May 2008, 3; Mr G. Fryatt, Chairman, Education Committee, Victorian Farmers' Federation, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 14 April 2008, 34; Bendigo Senior Secondary College, Written Submission, March 2008, 5; Ms H. Rawlings, Bairnsdale, Written Submission, March 2008, 1; Mallee Family Care, Written Submission, March 2008, 12; Mrs V. Draper, Parent, Eildon, Written Submission, May 2008, 1; Ms H. Sobey, Parent, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Hamilton, 28 April 2008, 65.

<sup>1076</sup> The University of Melbourne, Written Submission, March 2008, 6.

<sup>1077</sup> Mr B. Baker, Convener and Member, South West Regional Youth Affairs Network, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Hamilton, 28 April 2008, 11.

<sup>1078</sup> Ms K. Lam and Ms K. Ottrey, Representatives, Australian National University Students' Association, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Canberra, 17 June 2008, 27.

<sup>1079</sup> Ms K. Ottrey, Representative, Australian National University Students' Association, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Canberra, 17 June 2008, 27.

## The impact of transition experiences on retention and completion rates

Although there is considerable evidence to suggest that the transition to university can be more complex for students from regional and remote areas, and for students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds, research and data indicate that geographical differences in participation in higher education largely come into play before the transition to university. Once enrolled, students from regional Victoria and from low socioeconomic status backgrounds tend to experience broadly comparable success in their studies. As discussed in Chapter 2, differences between the completion rates of Australian higher education students from regional and urban areas appear to be small. Similarly, differences in retention and completion rates by socioeconomic status are slight.

The experiences of low and middle socioeconomic status students from more remote areas are an important exception to this pattern. Although their academic performance is roughly equivalent to their peers, the retention rate for students from remote areas is between seven and ten percentage points lower than urban students.<sup>1080</sup> Inquiry participants suggested that difficulty adjusting to the metropolitan environment and disconnection from strong social networks may help to explain this disparity. However, the Committee found that there is a lack of research which specifically addresses the causes of lower retention and completion for students from remote areas. This is an issue requiring further research which may help universities, schools and governments to devise appropriate strategies to support students from remote areas through to completion of their higher education course.

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## Accommodation

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The importance of accommodation was a particularly strong theme in evidence about factors that may impact on students' success at university. As one student from Benalla explained, access to suitable accommodation can contribute to students' overall state of mind during the transition to university:

I think you want to find somewhere that you feel really, really comfortable in that you really like so that that can help you when you go onto your higher education, which can be quite stressful. It's nice to have somewhere you feel happy living in, studying in and relaxing and you feel safe in.<sup>1081</sup>

The Committee heard that securing suitable accommodation, particularly university-run on-campus accommodation, is a foremost concern for many students when planning to relocate for study. Despite this, the Committee heard that some students have difficulty accessing appropriate accommodation.

## Types of accommodation

In Victoria, higher education students have a range of accommodation options. Like other individuals, students can seek private rental accommodation, either alone or in shared rental housing. Homestay accommodation, where a student boards in a private household, is another option. Students also have access to accommodation designed specifically for students.

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<sup>1080</sup> Centre for the Study of Higher Education, The University of Melbourne, for Universities Australia, *Participation and Equity: A review of the participation in higher education of people from low socioeconomic backgrounds and Indigenous people* (Melbourne: CSHE, 2008), 38.

<sup>1081</sup> Mr P. Marple, School Captain, Benalla College, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Benalla, 3 March 2009, 13.

Most Victorian universities own and operate some on-campus student accommodation. University-run student accommodation is usually in colleges or halls of residence, although some universities offer flat or house-style accommodation located on or near campus. Sometimes, colleges and halls of residence are privately owned and operated, but are affiliated with a particular university. Private companies also own and operate a range of student accommodation facilities, located close to universities and in Melbourne's inner city. These facilities generally take the form of large complexes of self-contained and furnished apartments. Finally, some not-for-profit organisations also operate student accommodation, although provision appears to be very limited.

### **Benefits of on-campus accommodation**

Many inquiry participants were of the view that on-campus student accommodation during the first year of study is a useful 'stepping stone' to university and to independence. While the level of support and services vary between different types of accommodation, students living on campus typically have access to greater academic and social support, including programs such as mentoring or study groups. Students living in on-campus accommodation also have fewer household responsibilities in terms of budgeting, cleaning and meal preparation.

Social engagement is another critical aspect of on-campus living. At many residential colleges, extensive orientation activities provide opportunities for new students to form friendships and develop a sense of community. Frequently, established students are paid to act as assistants, offering advice and support to enable a successful transition. Mr Waseem Awan, Manager of On-Campus Accommodation at Monash University's Gippsland campus, told the Committee that social outcomes are better for students living on campus.<sup>1082</sup> The University of Melbourne's 2007 Melbourne Experience Survey also found that students living on campus had a greater sense of belonging within the university than other students.<sup>1083</sup>

### ***Academic outcomes for students living on campus***

The Committee found evidence supporting the perception that living on campus may impact positively on students' success. Deakin University's internal studies show that students living on campus have experienced better academic results.<sup>1084</sup> Similarly, the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement, a large scale survey to assess students' experiences of conditions and activities that support high quality learning, has also indicated some benefits from on-campus accommodation. The 2007 survey found that students living on campus experienced a more supportive learning environment and more interactions with teachers than students living off campus.<sup>1085</sup> Figures provided by Monash Residential Services also show that students at the university who live on campus have a consistently higher pass rate when compared to other students (refer Table 8.1).

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<sup>1082</sup> Mr W. Awan, Manager, On-Campus Accommodation, Monash Residential Services, Gippsland, Monash University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Churchill, 19 May 2008, 60–61.

<sup>1083</sup> Supplementary information provided by the University of Melbourne, March 2009.

<sup>1084</sup> Mr J. Temple, Manager, Personal Support and Residences, Deakin University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Colac, 29 April 2008, 48.

<sup>1085</sup> 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, 18.

Table 8.1: Student Progress Units ratios for Monash University domestic students, by living situation (2001 to 2006)

Living situation	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Living in MRS managed on-site accommodation	0.86	0.92	0.93	0.92	0.94	0.95
Not living in MRS managed on-site accommodation	0.83	0.86	0.86	0.87	0.87	0.89

Note: The Student Progress Units (SPU) ratio is the ratio of load successfully completed by the student to the total assessed student load by the student. SPU ratios in the table were prepared by Monash University Statistical Services, using data from the profiles of students living at the Clayton residential complex. Other Monash Residential Services sites have too small a residential population to be included in the analysis.

Source: Monash Residential Services, Written Submission, May 2008, 3 (adapted).

At the same time, Mr John Devereaux, Director, Division of Student Life, Deakin University, noted that there is a lack of 'authoritative' Australian or international research regarding the impacts of on-campus accommodation.<sup>1086</sup> The Committee agrees that the better academic outcomes on the part of students living on campus should be interpreted with some caution, given that a students' prior academic achievement is often part of the selection criteria for on-campus accommodation places. Nevertheless, it appears likely that the supportive and social environment in most residential colleges contributes to student retention and success.

### *Benefits for rural and regional students*

Due to the additional support and social opportunities available, many young people, parents and school representatives argued that on-campus accommodation is ideal for most rural and regional students. The opportunity to live on campus may be even more important for those students who do not relocate with existing friends, or who lack prior support networks (such as extended family) in their new location.<sup>1087</sup> Professor Ross Chambers, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Academic, Charles Sturt University, told the Committee that making on-campus accommodation available to first year students is 'the most important thing' that the university does to support students living away from home.<sup>1088</sup> The Committee believes that ideally, all students from rural areas should be able to access on-campus student accommodation during their first year of study.

The Committee heard that for some prospective students from rural areas, access to on-campus accommodation is a deciding factor in choosing where—and even whether—to study. Ms Kate Ottrey, an Australian National University student originally from regional Victoria, told the Committee that on-campus accommodation was central to her choice of university:

For me, getting a place in a hall or college was the most important thing. If I did not have a place at ANU, I was going to go to Melbourne Uni instead; it was that important. It is really stressed at school, I find, in regional areas, that that is the way to make friends.<sup>1089</sup>

Similarly, one parent reported that his daughter chose to study in Sydney, rather than at a Melbourne-based university, simply because she was offered a place in on-campus

<sup>1086</sup> Mr J. Devereaux, Director, Division of Student Life, Deakin University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Colac, 29 April 2008, 48.

<sup>1087</sup> Mr J. Ireland, Coordinator, School Focused Youth Service, Gippsland Lakes Community Health, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Bairnsdale, 20 May 2008, 20.

<sup>1088</sup> Professor R. Chambers, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Academic, Charles Sturt University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Benalla, 3 March 2009, 43.

<sup>1089</sup> Ms K. Ottrey, Representative, Australian National University Students' Association, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Canberra, 17 June 2008, 25.

accommodation.<sup>1090</sup> One Victoria University student also described how being offered a place at the university's Maribyrnong Student Village made a crucial difference to her decision to study.<sup>1091</sup>

While student accommodation offers popular benefits, the Committee heard that the cost of student accommodation currently poses a barrier to access for some students. Ms Sarah Cole, State President, Victorian Branch, National Union of Students, noted that accommodation in halls of residence is an expensive option that is unaffordable for many students.<sup>1092</sup> Participants called for increased provision of affordable, supported and supervised accommodation for young students.<sup>1093</sup> The Committee agrees that there should be a range of student accommodation options to meet different needs and that this should include lower-cost alternatives such as self-catering facilities.

## Access to student accommodation

There is strong demand for on-campus accommodation in Melbourne. In most cases, the number of applications is in excess of the places available. Data provided to the Committee by universities that operate accommodation in metropolitan Melbourne showed that applications tend to exceed available places by between 30 and 300 per cent. For example, in 2008, Deakin University received 572 applications for 200 accommodation places in Melbourne for the following year.<sup>1094</sup> In addition, university-operated student accommodation in Melbourne had 100 per cent occupancy rates in almost all instances.<sup>1095</sup>

There was significant concern among inquiry participants that students from rural areas often miss out on a place in on-campus accommodation,<sup>1096</sup> with a relatively widespread perception that metropolitan students and international students are advantaged in terms of gaining a place.<sup>1097</sup> Some teachers argued that active intervention on the part of teachers, or parental know how about how to maximise the chance of selection is often necessary.<sup>1098</sup> Several participants suggested that universities should prioritise students from rural and regional areas when offering places in high-demand on-campus accommodation.<sup>1099</sup>

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<sup>1090</sup> Mr M. Wagg, Parent, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Hamilton, 28 April 2008, 64.

<sup>1091</sup> Ms S. Powell, Student, Victoria University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Sunshine, 12 August 2008, 38.

<sup>1092</sup> Ms S. Cole, State President, Victorian Branch, National Union of Students, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 14 April 2008, 21.

<sup>1093</sup> For example, Mr T. Barton, Careers Coordinator, Orbost Secondary College, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Bairnsdale, 20 May 2008, 41; Ms J. Billingsley, School Captain, Benalla College, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Benalla, 3 March 2009, 4; Mr P. Marple, School Captain, Benalla College, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Benalla, 3 March 2009, 5; Australian Catholic University, Written Submission, March 2008, 4.

<sup>1094</sup> Supplementary information provided by Deakin University, March 2009.

<sup>1095</sup> Supplementary information provided by Victorian universities, March 2009.

<sup>1096</sup> Mr N. and Mrs W. O'Brien, Parents, Wodonga, Written Submission, April 2008, 2; South West Association of Post Primary Principals, Written Submission, April 2008, 5; Ms C. Torpey, Careers Coordinator, Ouyen Secondary College, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Ouyen, 3 June 2008, 6; Mr M. Wagg, Parent, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Hamilton, 28 April 2008, 64; Ms A. Dunn, Treasurer, Colac Otway Youth Council, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Colac, 29 April 2008, 24; Ms M. Barton, Parent, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Bairnsdale, 20 May 2008, 26; Ms K. Hodge, Later Years Manager, Maffra Secondary College, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Bairnsdale, 20 May 2008, 43.

<sup>1097</sup> South West Association of Post Primary Principals, Written Submission, April 2008, 5; Ms E. Shepherd, Project Officer, Greater Green Triangle Area Consultative Committee, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Hamilton, 28 April 2008, 37; Mr T. Barton, Careers Coordinator, Orbost Secondary College, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Bairnsdale, 20 May 2008, 41.

<sup>1098</sup> Ms C. Torpey, Careers Coordinator, Ouyen Secondary College, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Ouyen, 3 June 2008, 6; South West Association of Post Primary Principals, Written Submission, April 2008, 5.

<sup>1099</sup> Catholic College Wodonga, Written Submission, June 2008, 4; Ms C. Torpey, Careers Coordinator, Ouyen Secondary College, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Ouyen, 3 June 2008, 6; Mr T. Barton, Careers Coordinator, Orbost Secondary College, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Bairnsdale, 20 May 2008, 41; Ms K. Hodge, Later Years Manager, Maffra Secondary College, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Bairnsdale, 20 May 2008, 43; Ms J. Billingsley and Mr P. Marple, School Captains, Benalla College, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Benalla, 3 March 2009, 4-5.

The Committee reviewed selection criteria for places in on-campus accommodation, and found that rurality or distance from the campus forms part of the selection criteria at many, but not all, university owned and operated halls of residence and colleges. Deakin University, Swinburne University of Technology and the University of Ballarat indicated that students relocating from a rural or regional area are given preference, although it is sometimes unclear how heavily this is weighted against other criteria.<sup>1100</sup> Selection criteria at Victoria University do not make reference to rurality or relocation.<sup>1101</sup> Other universities either did not supply information about selection criteria, indicated that they do not operate substantial student accommodation, or stated that there is no specific selection policy for places.<sup>1102</sup>

Some universities supplied data showing the geographical backgrounds of residents in university-operated student accommodation. At those universities for which data was received, students with a regional background substantially outnumber those from the local area, while international students also make up a significant proportion of residents.<sup>1103</sup>

The Committee notes that students from a range of backgrounds may benefit from the academic and social advantages of on-campus accommodation, and that there are a number of considerations that universities must balance in allocating student places. However, the Committee was struck by the particular importance placed on on-campus accommodation by rural and regional students who have no choice but to relocate to study. The Committee believes that universities should, where possible, give priority to students from rural and regional areas when selecting applicants for on-campus accommodation in Melbourne.

At the same time, the Committee also heard that on-campus accommodation does not always live up to high initial expectations, with some parents and teachers sharing examples of students who had negative experiences of on-campus accommodation.<sup>1104</sup> Mr Rob Johnson, Careers Pathways Manager, Swan Hill College, offered a representative anecdote:

She thought staying on campus would be the right decision so that she could make links and start to develop friends and start to fit in. She expected that there would be a lot of regional students on campus because who else is going to want on-campus accommodation? The fact is that when she got down there, that on-campus accommodation is full of people from Melbourne ... All these friendship groups come in together into this on-campus accommodation and the regional student is left isolated, and she is one of the ones who is actually planning to leave at mid-year.<sup>1105</sup>

A common theme running through this and other experiences with on-campus accommodation is the social isolation in the absence of other students with a similar background.

Anecdotes suggest that to some extent, on-campus living may simply replicate and reinforce the minority status of students from rural and regional areas. The Committee notes that this is likely to be true for students from all 'minority' cultures, who may find that on-campus

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<sup>1100</sup> Supplementary information provided by the Deakin University, Swinburne University of Technology and the University of Ballarat, March 2009.

<sup>1101</sup> Supplementary information provided by Victoria University, March 2009.

<sup>1102</sup> Supplementary information provided by La Trobe University, RMIT University, Monash University and the Australian Catholic University, March 2009.

<sup>1103</sup> Supplementary information provided by Victorian universities, March 2009.

<sup>1104</sup> Ms T. Wilson-Brown, Parent, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Bairnsdale, 20 May 2008, 24; Ms P. Nunan, Principal, Werrimull P-12 School, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Ouyen, 3 June 2008, 51; Mr R. Johnson, Careers Pathways Manager, Swan Hill College, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Robinvale, 2 June 2008, 18.

<sup>1105</sup> Mr R. Johnson, Careers Pathways Manager, Swan Hill College, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Robinvale, 2 June 2008, 18.

living replicates the dominant culture of the university. The Committee notes that other forms of accommodation, such as boarding with a family or sharing private accommodation with like-minded students, may help students develop a sense of belonging in the university environment.

Participants made suggestions as to how student accommodation could be expanded. The National Union of Students suggested there might be some scope for the integration of student accommodation with public housing initiatives.<sup>1106</sup> Another participant proposed that providing students with accommodation allowances may create an incentive for developers and others to work with universities to build more supported student accommodation.<sup>1107</sup> The Committee believes that there may be a role for the Victorian Government to work with universities and developers to investigate options for the expansion of affordable supported student accommodation for rural and regional students.

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## Student services and transition support programs

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Universities in Victoria have a range of standard and specialised services and programs designed to support students throughout their studies. The Committee heard that these programs and services can make a genuine difference to students, particularly those from under-represented areas and groups. For example, Professor David Battersby, Vice-Chancellor, University of Ballarat, attributed the high success rate of students with lower Equivalent National Tertiary Entrance Ranks (ENTERS) or from disadvantaged backgrounds to the 'immense support' provided by the university in the first 18 months of study.<sup>1108</sup>

Services and programs for universities are likely to become increasingly important as the higher education system expands. As discussed in Chapter 2, the Australian Government is seeking an overall increase in participation in higher education, with a target of 40 per cent attainment of a bachelor degree among 25- to 34-year-olds by 2025. At the same time, the Australian Government hopes to increase the proportion of undergraduate enrolments from low socioeconomic status backgrounds to 20 per cent by 2020. Both of these participation targets are relevant to the Committee's inquiry, as they are unlikely to be met without increased participation among population groups where participation is currently low.

Universities participating in the Committee's inquiry noted that as participation in higher education increases as a result of Australian Government policy changes, institutions will need to provide more of the support services that increase students' chances of success. Mr Chris Sheargold, Associate Vice-Chancellor, Melbourne Campus, Australian Catholic University, observed that expansion of higher education provision will inevitably change the characteristics of the student cohort. Mr Sheargold argued that if greater numbers of students who are less academically prepared for higher education are admitted, universities will require funding to provide greater support.<sup>1109</sup> Professor Elizabeth Harman, Vice-Chancellor, Victoria University, emphasised the high cost to universities of providing

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<sup>1106</sup> Ms S. Cole, State President, Victorian Branch, National Union of Students, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 14 April 2008, 21.

<sup>1107</sup> Mr D. Conley, Youth Services Coordinator, Mornington Peninsula Shire Council, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Rosebud, 12 May 2008, 4.

<sup>1108</sup> Professor D. Battersby, Vice-Chancellor, University of Ballarat, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 30 March 2009, 28.

<sup>1109</sup> Mr C. Sheargold, Associate Vice-Chancellor, Melbourne Campus, Australian Catholic University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 30 March 2009, 18–19.

student support programs such as English language support and financial assistance for students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds.<sup>1110</sup>

The Committee heard the view that those institutions that educate large numbers of students with additional support needs require additional Australian Government funding. Professor Richard Teese, Director, Centre for Post-compulsory Education and Lifelong Learning, The University of Melbourne, argued that funding should reward the universities that are prepared to work with low-income or low-achieving students, arguing that the current funding model instead tends to penalise these institutions:

The penalties are that they are exposed to greater attrition rates, to a weaker reputation. Their resources must be more focused on teaching than research, yet research is the thing that universities are graded on.<sup>1111</sup>

Similarly, Professor Sally Walker, Vice-Chancellor of Deakin University, argued that funding should be provided to those institutions that are 'genuinely and authentically interested in equity and access'.<sup>1112</sup>

The Committee agrees that student support services will need to be expanded and strengthened as participation in higher education increases, if completion rates are to remain stable or improve. The Committee also believes that additional resources will be most effective if they are directed at those institutions where student needs are greatest. The Committee therefore welcomes Australian Government moves to offer a clear financial incentive for universities to enrol more students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds. Under the announced changes, universities will be provided with a loading related to the number of such students enrolled. This loading will help universities to provide intensive support to disadvantaged students, with the goal of improving retention and completion rates.<sup>1113</sup>

With these considerations in mind, the Committee considered the types of services and programs currently available to students, and how they meet the needs of different student groups.

### University and student organisation services and strategies

All university students have access to services provided by their university and/or student organisation. These services help to enhance the student experience and to support students through to completion of their studies. The Committee found that in recent years, universities have begun to pay more attention specifically to the experiences of first year students, in an effort to ease the transition to university and to retain students during this critical phase.

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<sup>1110</sup> Professor E. Harman, Vice-Chancellor, Victoria University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 30 March 2009, 3.

<sup>1111</sup> 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, 17–18.

<sup>1112</sup> Professor S. Walker, Vice-Chancellor, Deakin University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 30 March 2009, 18.

<sup>1113</sup> Australian Government, 'Funding to Support Low SES Participation Targets,' *Transforming Australia's Higher Education System* Fact Sheet 2 (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2009), 1.

### *Student services*

Universities provide a range of services aimed at enhancing student wellbeing and success. These typically include services that promote health, wellbeing and personal development, such as counselling, chaplaincy, health services and career/employment services. In addition, academic skills units assist students with study, writing, speaking, time management and exam preparation skills. Universities also offer advice or other assistance with regard to finances, housing and childcare, while Indigenous and disability units support specific student groups.

Student organisations have also traditionally had a strong role in supporting the social transition to university through clubs and societies, orientation week activities and other social events. They have also supported students with academic and legal advocacy and welfare, housing, sporting and retail services. These services and activities were seen as crucial by student organisations, universities, peak bodies and others participating in the inquiry. In particular, Mr Tim Beckett, Registrar, Australian National University Student Services, told the Committee that orientation programs are 'exceedingly important' for students, and noted that a study of international students had shown that those who do not attend orientation are more likely to experience transition difficulties.<sup>1114</sup>

Numerous participants, predominantly from the higher education sector, therefore expressed concern about the impact on student services of the *Higher Education Support (Abolition of Compulsory Up-front Student Fees) Act 2005*, which removed the right of universities to charge compulsory upfront fees for membership of a student organisation or the provision of non-academic services. Student organisations told the Committee that the reforms had affected their ability to provide essential support services, resulting in price increases and reduced services at a number of Victorian campuses. This was seen as a particular concern at regional campuses, where there are fewer opportunities for economies of scale, and replacement services are not readily available outside of the university.<sup>1115</sup> An Australian Government review of the impact of voluntary student unionism also found that the abolition of upfront compulsory student fees had resulted in a reduction in services and amenities, and that the impact was greatest at small and regional campuses.<sup>1116</sup>

While student organisations have reduced in size or ceased to exist at some universities and campuses, at others, universities have replaced part of the funding lost to student organisations.<sup>1117</sup> Professor Richard Larkins then Vice-Chancellor, Monash University, explained that the university had put money back into student organisations to provide additional services and extra-curricular activities. Professor Larkins added that these services are seen as 'absolutely fundamental' to the university experience.<sup>1118</sup>

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<sup>1114</sup> Mr T. Beckett, Registrar, Australian National University Student Services, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Canberra, 17 June 2008, 19–20.

<sup>1115</sup> National Tertiary Education Union (Victorian Division), Written Submission, March 2008, 5; Bendigo Student Association, Bendigo Campus, La Trobe University, Written Submission, April 2008, 4; Deakin University Student Association, Written Submission, April 2008, 4–5.

<sup>1116</sup> Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, *The Impact of Voluntary Student Unionism on Services, Amenities and Representation for Australian University Students: Summary Report* (Canberra: DEEWR, 2008), 2.

<sup>1117</sup> Mr M. Gallagher, Executive Director, Group of Eight, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Canberra, 17 June 2008, 5; Professor R. Larkins, Chair, Universities Australia, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 3 March 2008, 24–25.

<sup>1118</sup> Professor R. Larkins, Chair, Universities Australia, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 3 March 2008, 25.

Under changes announced by the Australian Government in late 2008, universities will be allowed to levy a compulsory fee of up to \$250 for student services and amenities from July 2009. Payment of the fee can be deferred, and the prohibition on compulsory student organisation membership will remain.<sup>1119</sup> The Committee welcomes these changes as a means of helping to restore services that support student transitions and success, whether these are provided directly by universities or by student organisations.

### *First year and transition strategies*

In February 2009, the Committee wrote to all Victorian universities requesting specific information on universities' strategies and programs that address the specific transition needs of first year students. Information provided in response to this request indicates that in addition to standard services, many universities have specific transition or first year experience strategies or plans aimed at enhancing the first year experience and the likelihood of successful transition. These strategies may focus both on supporting the social transition through support services and extra-curricular activities, and on supporting the academic transition to higher education studies.

For example, Deakin University has developed a formal student transition program, informed by research and experience. Transition is centrally coordinated and managed by a Transition Team, which draws together representatives from all faculties and administrative areas, while a Transition Advisory Working Party of the Academic Board provides governance in the area of transitions. Transition strategies and programs are integrated into key academic plans such as the Teaching and Learning Plan, Faculty and School Work Plans and professional development programs for teaching staff. The student transition program brings together academic, social and support elements and includes specialised programs for specific target groups. Information and support is provided to students through trained senior student hosts and mentors, presentations, printed materials, online, and at showcase events such as a Student Services Carnival.<sup>1120</sup>

Similarly, at the University of Melbourne, a range of initiatives and activities have been implemented to support the transition of first year students. In addition to standard orientation events, presentations and academic skills support opportunities, the university operates mentor schemes, study groups and first year learning centres. A weblog for first year students is hosted on the university's website. A range of additional opportunities and activities are available to students who have graduated from the university's Kwong Lee Dow Young Scholars Program.<sup>1121</sup> At the beginning of 2009, the University of Melbourne piloted a three-day orientation program specifically for students who face a long commute to campus. Hosted by later year students, the program included two nights in a residential college and a mix of academic and social activities designed to introduce students to university life. The program aims to help students develop a familiarity with university services and the skills to manage university life as a commuter.<sup>1122</sup>

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<sup>1119</sup> Kate Ellis MP, Australian Government Minister for Youth, 'Rebuilding Student Support Services in Our Universities,' Media Release 3 November 2008, Ministers' Media Centre, Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Portfolio, [http://www.deewr.gov.au/Ministers/Ellis/Media/Releases/Pages/Article\\_081130\\_112847.aspx](http://www.deewr.gov.au/Ministers/Ellis/Media/Releases/Pages/Article_081130_112847.aspx) (accessed 27 May 2009).

<sup>1120</sup> Supplementary information provided by Deakin University, March 2009.

<sup>1121</sup> The Kwong Lee Dow Young Scholars Program is an academic enrichment program designed to support high-achieving Victorian secondary school students and select secondary school students from the New South Wales and South Australian border. For more information, see <http://www.futurestudents.unimelb.edu.au/school/kwongleedow/>.

<sup>1122</sup> Supplementary information provided by the University of Melbourne, March 2009.

The Committee heard that transition initiatives can also be integrated into teaching and curriculum through a wide range of approaches. These include: the development of more responsive first year curriculum; the use of smaller tutorial groups to facilitate social interaction; professional development for academic staff who teach first year students; learning resources; early feedback on work; and supportive approaches to teaching and assessment.<sup>1123</sup> For example, as a part of its Curriculum Renewal project, La Trobe University has identified a need for improvements to first year curriculum. Additionally, the university's Curriculum Taskforce has recommended a review of first year teaching to ensure that it helps students to develop essential academic skills that they will need to successfully complete their studies.<sup>1124</sup>

A number of universities also have mechanisms to gather student feedback that is used in planning for future orientation and transition programs. For example, the University of Melbourne runs a First Year Summit that gives students the opportunity to offer feedback on their experiences as first year students.<sup>1125</sup> Other universities gather feedback on transition experiences through mechanisms such as first year surveys or ongoing online discussion forums.<sup>1126</sup> Information from the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement and the First Year Experience survey also provides universities with information that can be used to inform new strategies and initiatives.<sup>1127</sup>

## Targeting student services and programs

Despite the efforts of universities to enhance the first year experience and provide student services and activities, many inquiry participants felt that the support available to promote successful transition is often insufficient, and that students from rural and remote areas could benefit from more intensive and targeted assistance. Comments from some participants suggest that a perception still exists that students at university are only 'one in a sea of thousands', and that little support is available to them.<sup>1128</sup>

As well as being accessible, the Committee heard that services and programs need to be targeted at those students most likely to benefit from them. Mr John Devereaux, Director, Division of Student Life, Deakin University, told the Committee that a challenge for universities is how to communicate effectively to the student body about the student support services provided.<sup>1129</sup> The Committee heard that some universities have tried to address these issues by identifying commencing students that are likely to benefit from the university's support services. For example, the University of Melbourne indicated that it is moving towards the use of an enrolment questionnaire to identify factors that place students at greater risk of academic difficulties, so that these students can be 'flagged and targeted for active support and assistance' during the transition period.<sup>1130</sup>

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<sup>1123</sup> Kerri-Lee Krause, 'Transition to and through the first year: strategies to enhance the student experience' (keynote presentation to the Inaugural Vice-Chancellor's Learning and Teaching Colloquium 2006, University of the Sunshine Coast, Sippy Downs, 31 May 2006); Supplementary information provided by Deakin University and the University of Ballarat, March 2009.

<sup>1124</sup> Supplementary information provided by La Trobe University, March 2009.

<sup>1125</sup> Supplementary information provided by the University of Melbourne, March 2009.

<sup>1126</sup> Supplementary information provided by the University of Ballarat and the Australian Catholic University, March 2009.

<sup>1127</sup> Supplementary information provided by La Trobe University, March 2009.

<sup>1128</sup> Ms S. Monahu, Careers Officer, Bairnsdale Secondary College, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Bairnsdale, 20 May 2008, 38; Equity and Access Unit, La Trobe University, Written Submission, April 2008, 10; Ms H. Sobey, Parent, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Hamilton, 28 April 2008, 65.

<sup>1129</sup> Mr J. Devereaux, Director, Division of Student Life, Deakin University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Colac, 29 April 2008, 49.

<sup>1130</sup> The University of Melbourne, Written Submission, March 2008, 7.

Whilst in Canada, the Committee heard from the University of Quebec about similar initiatives in its Outcome Improvement Centre. The Centre surveys new students and analyses the data to assign a 'likelihood of success' to each student. It then monitors students' progress, referring students to appropriate support services or assisting them to move into a more suitable course where necessary.<sup>1131</sup>

In addition to more closely targeting mainstream services to students with the greatest needs, universities and others can provide programs that address specific issues for target groups. The Committee heard about three types of targeted program: mentoring, pre-university transition initiatives, and activities that involve parents in supporting the move to higher education.

### *Mentoring*

Several participants suggested that students who have relocated for university should have access to personal support through mentoring or similar programs.<sup>1132</sup> The Committee received evidence about several mentoring initiatives at Victorian and interstate universities.<sup>1133</sup> The purpose of such programs is to support the transition of students to university by providing information and guidance as well as an avenue for social networking.

Typically, mentoring programs offer the opportunity for first year students to be linked with a later year student mentor, often from the same area of study. Approximately once per week for the first six to eight weeks of semester, small student groups meet with their mentor. These meetings may involve planned activities, or may simply offer an opportunity for informal discussion. The role of the mentor is to provide general advice on the transition process and on the services offered by the university. Mentors receive training in group dynamics, communication skills and university services and referral. Their participation is generally on a volunteer basis, although mentors in some programs are paid. Some mentoring programs target specific cohorts of first year students, including those from rural areas and interstate.

Mentoring programs may also be community-based rather than specific to a particular university. One exemplary program that came to the Committee's attention was Mallee Family Care's Chances for Children scholarship program, which is targeted specifically at regional students from Victoria's north-west. Chances for Children offers scholarship recipients the opportunity to be individually matched with a screened and trained volunteer mentor who provides support during the process of transition to university and to independent living in the metropolitan environment.<sup>1134</sup> In Melbourne, mentoring takes place through a partnership with Ernst & Young, while mentors in other locations are identified through word-of-mouth.<sup>1135</sup>

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<sup>1131</sup> Meeting with representatives of the University of Quebec, Quebec, 3 September 2008.

<sup>1132</sup> National Rural Health Alliance, Written Submission, February 2008, 6; South West Association of Post Primary Principals, Written Submission, April 2008, 8; North Central LLEN, Written Submission, May 2008, 8; Mrs J. Boyle, Principal, Mortlake P-12 College, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Colac, 29 April 2008, 32; Ms S. Monahu, Careers Officer, Bairnsdale Secondary College, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Bairnsdale, 20 May 2008, 38.

<sup>1133</sup> Mr T. Beckett, Registrar, Australian National University Student Services, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Canberra, 17 June 2008, 19-20; University of Ballarat, Written Submission, March 2008, 3; Mr M. Gallagher, Executive Director, Group of Eight, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Canberra, 17 June 2008, 5.

<sup>1134</sup> Chances for Children, 'Mentoring,' Chances for Children, <http://www.chancesforchildren.com.au/mentor.htm> (accessed 16 July 2009).

<sup>1135</sup> Ms F. Harley, Manager, Chances for Children, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Robinvale, 2 June 2008, 27.

The success of Chances for Children was acknowledged by some participants in the inquiry.<sup>1136</sup> One recipient of a Chances for Children scholarship told the Committee that mentoring provides a vital support for rural students making the difficult transition from school to higher education.<sup>1137</sup> A 2007 evaluation confirmed that a substantial majority of mentees participating in the program were supportive and enthusiastic about its benefits.<sup>1138</sup> The Committee commends Mallee Family Care on this innovative program, and suggests that it may provide a useful model for other groups interested in supporting transitions for students from their local area.

### *Pre-university transition initiatives*

Some participants suggested that initiatives to prepare rural and regional students for university before they enrol have the potential to ease transition difficulties for this group, as well as to build aspirations and confidence. For example, the Rural Education Forum Australia proposed the development of a country-city twinning program to provide opportunities for rural students to form sustained relationships with students in large city-based or regional schools who are aiming to enter higher education. The program would involve students in both onsite and ICT-based activities from year 9 onwards. The Forum suggested that such an approach may help to build an active interest in higher education pathways for a greater number of rural students, as well as immersing them in a wider network of university oriented peers.<sup>1139</sup>

The Committee also heard that similar activities, although on a smaller scale, have already been initiated by some schools. In recognition of the importance of social networks to successful transition, some schools in regional Victoria have worked together with their Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLENs) to arrange social gatherings for secondary students who will be relocating for study.<sup>1140</sup> Similarly, two leaders from remote schools suggested that there may be potential to make greater use of videoconferencing and information and communications technologies to form social connections between students from regional areas.<sup>1141</sup>

It was also suggested that university-bound students from rural areas could benefit from increased opportunities to visit and gain familiarity with metropolitan environments.<sup>1142</sup> This may include assistance in locating and connecting with services and social networks in their new location, such as sporting clubs and accommodation providers, either through a brokerage model or by transition support workers.<sup>1143</sup> The Committee agrees that such programs may help relieve the isolation of students from small schools, and enable them to develop the familiarity and connections that have the potential to ease future transitions.

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<sup>1136</sup> Ms J. Crealy, Coordinator, Reconnect Program, Gippsland Lakes Community Health, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Bairnsdale, 20 May 2008, 19–20; Cr V. Knight, Deputy Mayor, Mildura Rural City Council, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Ouyen, 3 June 2008, 31.

<sup>1137</sup> Ms C. Timpano, Student, Bendigo Campus, La Trobe University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Robinvale, 2 June 2008, 27–28.

<sup>1138</sup> Daniel Edwards, *Chances for Children Mentor Program Process Evaluation Report* (Melbourne: Centre for Population and Urban Research, Monash University, 2007).

<sup>1139</sup> Rural Education Forum Australia, Written Submission, April 2008, 4–5.

<sup>1140</sup> Equity and Access Unit, La Trobe University, Written Submission, April 2008, 10.

<sup>1141</sup> 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, 32.

<sup>1142</sup> Ms M. Barton, Parent, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Bairnsdale, 20 May 2008, 29; South West Association of Post Primary Principals, Written Submission, April 2008, 8–9.

<sup>1143</sup> Ms L. Bartlett, Regional Youth Affairs Consultant, Barwon Adolescent Task Force, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Colac, 29 April 2008, 38–40; Mr P. Brown, Executive Officer, Country Education Project, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 25 February 2008, 27.

The Committee was also advised about university transition initiatives during its international investigations. In Scotland, Ms Margaret Dundas, National Coordinator for Widening Participation, explained the role of the Scottish Wider Access Regional Forums, of which all colleges and higher education institutions in Scotland are a member. The purpose of the four regional forums is to advance the nation's wider access and participation agenda through a wide range of aspiration-raising and transition support projects.<sup>1144</sup>

For example, the West Forum's On Track Project was established in 2002 to support those students who are about to make, or who are considering making, the transition from college to degree level study at a higher education institution. On Track supports these students through a 10-hour study skills program aimed at: providing an insight to what degree level study involves; improving existing skills and equipping students with additional skills; boosting the confidence of students in their own abilities; and helping students to make a smoother transition into degree level study. The Committee heard the program works best when delivered by a postgraduate tutor working alongside an undergraduate mentor, particularly where the mentor and/or tutor are undertaking study in a discipline of interest to participants.<sup>1145</sup>

The experiences of the Scottish Wider Access Regional Forums hold a variety of lessons for policymakers in terms of working more effectively with people of certain age groups, genders or backgrounds. For example, they have found that sport is often a good way of engaging males of all ages, while programs with a focus on developing generic skills tend to be less attractive to males than to females. In general, the most effective approach in transition support programs in Scotland to date has been to deliver the program through a specific subject area.<sup>1146</sup>

### *Involving parents*

The Committee heard that increasing family support can be an important part of transition initiatives for higher education students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds, particularly those who are first in their family to attend university. In Scotland, the Committee was advised that while involving parents in initiatives is very important, it is not an easy task, especially where young people exert their independence.<sup>1147</sup> It is also likely to be difficult to engage parents in the university transition if they have not experienced higher education themselves, or if they have prior negative experiences in the education system. The Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation also emphasised to the Committee the importance of involving parents, particularly those of 'first-in-family' students who may not have the mentoring skills required to assist their child in the transition to higher education.<sup>1148</sup>

One innovative transition initiative that came to the Committee's attention is the Parent Information Program at Victoria University, which gives parents an opportunity to visit the university and learn about higher education and the transition process. Parents in the program listen to presentations, receive written materials and have the opportunity to talk informally with university staff. Topics covered include: administrative and practical matters; available support services; student finances; time management; the importance of social and recreational activities; and the ways in which parents can assist their children while

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<sup>1144</sup> Meeting with Ms M. Dundas, National Coordinator for Widening Participation, Scottish Wider Access Regional Forums, Edinburgh, 29 August 2008.

<sup>1145</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>1146</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>1147</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>1148</sup> Meeting with representatives of the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation, Montreal, 2 September 2008.

studying.<sup>1149</sup> Evaluation feedback suggests that the program is considered useful by participants, and answers most parents' questions about higher education.<sup>1150</sup> According to evaluation feedback, approximately 80 per cent of participants in the program are parents of a student who is the first in their family to attend university, with most coming from Melbourne's west and outer west, as well as regional Victoria.<sup>1151</sup>

The Committee heard that Deakin University and the University of Ballarat also produce information resources for parents, particularly targeting those with little or no family experience of higher education.<sup>1152</sup> The Committee believes that initiatives to help engage parents in their children's education are likely to promote successful transition for some students, and therefore encourages universities to maintain and expand such initiatives.

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## Conclusion and recommendations

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Throughout the inquiry, the Committee heard from students, parents and others about the transition to higher education. In particular, the Committee heard that additional challenges often confront higher education students from rural and regional areas and low socioeconomic status backgrounds. At the same time, evidence about the completion rates of these students, while mixed, suggests that they experience comparable success in their studies. The Committee believes that the weight of attention and effort must therefore be focused on building achievement, aspirations and access to higher education. Students from remote areas with low and medium socioeconomic status backgrounds appear to be an important exception, and the Committee believes that further work may be needed in this area.

Nonetheless, the comparable success of rural and low socioeconomic status students does not imply that programs and services that support students' retention and success are not important. As participation in higher education by under-represented groups increases, it will be important for universities to sustain and enhance the supports that help students to be successful in their studies. Throughout the inquiry, the Committee identified various programs that may offer valuable support to these students, including university student services, mentoring programs, pre-transition programs and initiatives that involve parents in supporting transition. Programs such as these should continue to be developed and strengthened, and integrated with broader aspiration-raising initiatives.

The Committee also received a great deal of evidence that access to appropriate and affordable student accommodation is seen as critical for students commencing and completing higher education. Given the current challenges many students face in accessing suitable accommodation, the Committee believes that the Victorian Government should work with other stakeholders to evaluate the current availability and potential expansion of supported student accommodation in Melbourne.

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<sup>1149</sup> Ms M. Weiss, Student Counsellor, Counselling Service, Parent Information Program, Victoria University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Sunshine, 12 August 2008, 31.

<sup>1150</sup> Ms J. Halat, Acting Manager, Parent Information Program, Victoria University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Sunshine, 12 August 2008, 32.

<sup>1151</sup> *ibid.*, 31.

<sup>1152</sup> Supplementary information provided by Deakin University, March 2009.

## Recommendations

- 8.1 That the Victorian Government work with higher education providers, other levels of government, and developers to evaluate the current availability and potential further development of affordable supported student accommodation in Melbourne for rural and regional students.
- 8.2 That the Victorian Government work with universities and other stakeholders to strengthen support to students making the transition to university, by:
- assisting small rural and remote schools to provide students with opportunities to visit metropolitan environments and meet peers from other areas as part of a country-city twinning program;
  - examining the causes of lower course completion rates among higher education students from remote areas, and developing options for additional support; and
  - facilitating the development of further targeted support programs reflecting best practice, including mentoring programs, pre-university transition initiatives and activities that involve parents in transition support.

