

Introduction

Having well educated, visionary, well-travelled people in the local population lifts the whole community. They bring hope. They are an inspiration to others and their achievements encourage people to look beyond their own borders, consider what their own potential might be and what they could achieve themselves. Such positivity can only benefit the local community.¹

Higher education contributes to the wellbeing of both the individual and society. For students, university study presents the opportunity for personal growth and fulfilment, while offering knowledge and skills for the future. At the same time, the higher education system produces skilled graduates who are vital to local and national economies and to civil society.

It is important that individuals have opportunities to participate in quality higher education, regardless of location or background. While overall higher education participation in Victoria is high, there are substantial and long-standing differences in the rate of participation across different areas and social groups. These differences arise from a complex mix of interrelated geographical, socioeconomic and cultural factors.

The Committee believes that a number of steps can be taken to increase opportunities for more people to consider higher education, and to participate successfully. Achieving this will require cooperation between education providers, communities and all levels of government.

Through the course of its investigations, the Committee heard from stakeholders across Victoria interested in increasing higher education participation, many of whom have already begun to take action towards this goal. The Committee believes that the enthusiasm of stakeholders and the initiatives and approaches that are already in place provide a strong foundation for expanded and renewed efforts to tackle inequities in higher education participation.

Functions of the Committee

The Education and Training Committee comprises seven members of Parliament, with five drawn from the Legislative Assembly and two from the Legislative Council. Mr Geoff Howard MP chairs the Committee.

¹ Ms V. Love, Parent, Inverloch, Written Submission, May 2008, 4.

Inquiry into Geographical Differences in Participation in Higher Education in Victoria

The Education and Training Committee is constituted under the *Parliamentary Committees Act 2003*. The Committee's specific function under the Act is to:

Inquire into, consider and report to the Parliament on any proposal, matter or thing concerned with education or training if the Committee is required or permitted to do so by or under the Act.

Terms of reference

On Wednesday 18 July 2007, the Legislative Council of the Parliament of Victoria referred to the Education and Training Committee, an inquiry into geographical differences in the rate in which Victorian students participate in higher education.

The Committee subsequently agreed that it would examine the following key issues associated with the terms of reference:

- a) variations in the number and type of university applications, offers, acceptances and completions in different metropolitan, rural and regional areas;
- b) influences of school retention rates, including enrolments and completions for VCE, VCAL and VET in schools on participation in higher education;
- c) influences of participation in other post-school pathways, including TAFE enrolments and take-up of apprenticeships or other employment opportunities, on participation in higher education;
- d) potential geographic, economic, social, cultural and other influences on university applications, offers, acceptances and completions across Victorian communities;
- e) advantages and disadvantages of participation and non-participation in higher education for school leavers and their families and communities in different metropolitan, rural and regional areas;
- f) potential effects of geographical differences in participation in higher education on skills shortages and the Victorian economy; and
- g) strategies to address any barriers contributing to geographic differences in participation in higher education.

The Committee was due to table a report in Parliament by 30 June 2009.

Inquiry methodology

Call for submissions

The terms of reference were initially advertised in *The Age* and *Herald Sun* on Saturday 2 February 2008, and the *Education Age* and *Herald Sun Learn* supplements on Monday 4 February 2008 and Tuesday 5 February 2008, respectively. Advertisements were also placed in *The Weekly Times* and 'Mighty V' Network newspapers in regional Victoria during February 2008 and in the Leader and Fairfax newsprint titles in June 2008. The terms of reference were also advertised in local newspapers in regional and rural Victoria throughout the inquiry, to coincide with the Committee's public hearings.

The Committee also advertised the inquiry to university, TAFE and secondary school students. Advertisements calling for submissions were placed in *Utimes* on Tuesday 18 March 2008 and in university and TAFE institute student publications from March through to August 2008. Prospective students were targeted through advertisements placed in *S Press* September 2008 edition and the *VTAC Guide 2009*.

In addition, in early 2008, the Committee wrote to approximately 730 organisations and individuals, inviting written submissions. This included universities, TAFE institutions, peak bodies in the tertiary education sector, industry bodies, relevant community organisations and local, state and federal governments. A further request for submissions specifically addressed principals, teachers and student leaders in Victorian secondary schools.

Key Research Questions for the inquiry were developed, based on the terms of reference, and provided to some inquiry participants, together with the terms of reference. The Key Research Questions for the inquiry are at Appendix A.

An online submission facility primarily intended for individuals who wished to make short submissions was made available. Fifty-four submissions were received by this means.

The Committee received 189 submissions (refer Appendix B), reflecting the high level of interest in the inquiry. Submissions came from a broad cross-section of the community, including young people, parents, schools, tertiary education providers, local government, peak bodies, community organisations, industry and interested individuals. Submissions were received from across metropolitan and regional Victoria, as well as from interstate and national bodies.

Literature review

The Committee found extensive international and Australian literature documenting geographical and other variations in higher education participation, and examining the causes and impacts of these differences. Within Australia, much of the available data and research has a Victorian focus, with two major research centres (the Centre for the Study of Higher Education and the Centre for Post-compulsory and Lifelong Learning, both at the University of Melbourne) based in Victoria. A great deal of research has also addressed a number of themes, such as school achievement and aspirations that the Committee found impacted on higher education participation. Many participants drew on this research in submissions and in presentations at public hearings. In particular, participants referred to:

- Destination data, longitudinal reports and annual reports from the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development's On Track survey of Victorian school leavers;
- Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth research reports, a particularly rich source of information about the characteristics, pathways and outcomes for Australian young people; and
- the work of researchers at the Centre for the Study of Higher Education at the University of Melbourne, particularly Professor Richard James' research on the relationships between rurality, socioeconomic status and higher education participation.

The Committee's report draws on this and other research where established findings support, challenge or expand on the evidence and perspectives of inquiry participants.

Data analysis

In addition the Committee considered data collected by the Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre. The Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre publishes data detailing applications, offers, enrolments and deferrals across 17 Victorian regions. However, the Committee requested a data set that would enable analysis of smaller geographic areas. The data set provided to the Committee contained information on 79 areas which approximate Victoria's Local Government Areas, and covers the years 2005–06, 2006–07 and 2007–08. The data set also included variables relating to fee type, course location, field of study, preference level and Equivalent National Tertiary Entrance Rank (ENTER).

Using this data, the Committee calculated application, offer, enrolment and deferment rates for different Victorian localities and regions. Separate analyses were carried out for school leavers and for older applicants. These analyses are discussed in detail in Chapter 2, with further analyses on specific issues detailed throughout the report.

Public hearings

A series of formal hearings was held over the period February 2008 to March 2009, in which 307 witnesses participated (refer Appendix C). Five hearings took place at Parliament House, with representation from the many peak agencies with an interest in the inquiry. The final hearing at Parliament House, in March 2009, involved representatives of eight of Victoria's universities in a roundtable discussion, to reflect on issues raised during the inquiry.

The nature of the inquiry called for a geographically diverse public hearing schedule. The Committee undertook hearings in Hamilton, Colac, Rosebud, Churchill, Bairnsdale, Robinvale, Ouyen and Benalla. These hearings attracted a high level of interest from local communities. This showed the importance of the inquiry to Victorians living in geographic areas that are currently under-represented in higher education participation. The Committee is also aware that geographic differences are not only reflected in differences between regional and metropolitan Victoria. Within metropolitan Melbourne, substantial differences in higher education participation exist between suburbs, closely associated with differences in socioeconomic status. The Committee therefore conducted hearings in Lilydale and Sunshine, both of which have lower rates of higher education participation when compared to other suburban locations.

The Committee was given the opportunity to observe technologies used in distance learning at the Telstra Executive Briefing Centre in Melbourne, in March 2009. As an example of these technologies, the Committee participated in a live video connection to hear evidence from a student in Morwell and an academic in Shepparton. These technologies have been promoted as a potential means of expanding higher education opportunities in remote geographic locations.

Interstate investigations

In June 2008, the Committee travelled to Canberra to conduct public hearings with representatives of Universities Australia and the Group of Eight, as well as with staff and students of two higher education institutions. The Committee was also briefed by the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.

In April 2009, the Committee investigated a unique model of regional higher education operating within the community of Geraldton, Western Australia. Established in 2002, the Geraldton Universities Centre has several features that made it a useful site for the Committee's investigations, especially its strong community input and ownership through the Geraldton Universities Access Group. The Group successfully lobbied for Commonwealth supported places to be allocated to the community rather than to a university provider. Also unique is the collaboration of multiple university partners delivering higher education programs at one site, with 'high tech, high touch' as a guiding principle to combine face-to-face delivery with cutting-edge technology. The Geraldton Universities Centre initially operated utilising existing community infrastructure, and a purpose-built facility was later established.

In Geraldton, the Committee met with students, staff and other stakeholders in the Geraldton Universities Centre, and in Perth, it met with representatives of the three universities involved in the Centre, and a representative of the Office of Higher Education, Department of Education Services.

Individuals involved in interstate investigations are listed in Appendix D.

International investigations

From 25 August to 5 September 2008, the Committee conducted international investigations for the inquiry, as well as for its *Inquiry into Effective Strategies for Teacher Professional Learning*. Finland, Scotland and Canada were identified as countries with particular relevance to both inquiries. Several members of the Committee, along with the Executive Officer, met with Ministers and representatives of government departments and agencies, universities, peak bodies and other organisations in the education sector. Individuals involved in these discussions are listed in Appendix E.

Finland

Finland has gained the attention of the education world by topping the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results in 2000, 2003 and 2006. Finland also ranks amongst the most equitable countries in terms of school achievement, with one of the lowest levels of between school variation and a smaller achievement gap between students according to socioeconomic status.² Given the importance of achievement at school as a prerequisite to higher education participation, the Committee believed it was important to investigate the factors contributing to the success of Finnish students.

The Committee was also interested to learn more about Finland's approach to regional higher education provision. Low population density and difficult geographical conditions have presented challenges for the equitable provision of education in Finland.³ However, the country has been relatively successful in improving the geographical accessibility of higher education through a long-standing policy focus on regional delivery.⁴ A rapid expansion of higher education in regions from the 1960s to the 1980s saw disparities in the

² Norton Grubb and others, *Equity in Education Thematic Review: Finland: Country Note* (Paris: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2005), 12.

³ Jussi Valimaa, 'Geopolitical and Cultural Coordinates for Finnish History,' in *Finnish Higher Education in Transition: Perspectives on massification and globalisation*, ed. Jussi Valimaa (Jyväskylä: Institute for Educational Research, University of Jyväskylä, 2001), 25–29.

⁴ John Davies and others, *Thematic Review of Tertiary Education: Finland* (Paris: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2006), 21.

regional background of Finnish university students almost disappear.⁵ Today, Finland has one of the densest university networks in Europe, with 21 universities and 26 polytechnics serving a population of approximately 5.3 million. While ongoing 'structural development' in the sector will involve a number of mergers, coalitions and alliances, most existing campuses will be retained.

Scotland

Increasing the participation of under-represented groups has been a focus of Scottish higher education policy for more than a decade. Research commissioned by the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council (published in 1998) revealed marked differences in the participation rates of students from different areas, and found that these were correlated with socioeconomic disadvantage.⁶ Between 2000 and 2004, higher education institutions shared £1.35 million per annum for 'widening participation' activities.⁷ While higher education policy in Scotland has been subject to continuing review and change, the emphasis on widening participation has remained. Widening participation activities, policies and programs were a central focus of the Committee's discussions in Scotland.

A second theme of the Committee's discussions in Scotland was the country's efforts to improve the geographic accessibility of higher education through flexible learning. In particular, the Committee was interested to learn about the ways in which Scottish higher education institutions support flexible learning through the provision of 'learning centres' and opportunities for students from remote areas to meet with each other and their tutors. The UHI Millennium Institute was a model that was of particular interest to the Committee.

Canada

Canada stands out amongst OECD countries as having the highest level of participation in post-secondary education, with nearly half of all Canadian adults aged 24 to 65 holding a tertiary qualification. Canada also compares well on measures of social equity in education, with below average variance in achievement between students and between schools. These factors, as well as the many demographic, cultural, historical and geographical similarities between Canada and Australia, led the Committee to include Canada in its international investigations. Of particular relevance to the inquiry were policies and programs in the provinces of Quebec and Ontario. Key topics for discussion were the various approaches to student financial support and the high level research programs implemented by the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation and the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario to support participation in higher education by students from under-represented groups.

Conferences and seminars

During the course of the inquiry, Members and staff attended the following relevant conferences and seminars.

⁵ Jussi Valimaa, 'A Historical Introduction to Finnish Higher Education,' in *Finnish Higher Education in Transition: Perspectives on massification and globalisation*, ed. Jussi Valimaa (Jyväskylä: Institute for Educational Research, University of Jyväskylä, 2001), 45.

⁶ Scottish Higher Education Funding Council, *Participation in Higher Education in Scotland* (Edinburgh: SHEFC, 1998).

⁷ Scottish Higher Education Funding Council, *Learning for All: The report of the SFEFC/SHEFC widening participation review group* (Edinburgh: SHEFC, 2005), 28.

Higher Education Summit

In April 2008, three Committee members and the research officer attended the 6th annual Higher Education Summit. The Summit brings together leaders from the higher education sector, government and business to examine issues and developments in higher education. Of particular relevance to the inquiry were discussions of: how regional universities contribute to their communities; the role of higher education in producing qualified graduates and meeting national and local skill needs; and directions in higher education equity policy at the national level.

The Summit also provided context for the inquiry by familiarising Committee members with broader issues and trends in the higher education sector. These include: the place of higher education within the tertiary education system; diversity and specialisation in higher education; research management; funding; internationalisation; and the move towards greater engagement with the community sector, business, government and the general public.

Forum on Higher Education and Social Inclusion

Committee members and staff were invited by the Group of Eight to attend the Higher Education and Social Inclusion Forum on 16 July 2008. The Forum was a joint initiative of the University of Melbourne, Australian National University, the Group of Eight and the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.

Speakers from Australia, New Zealand, England and the United States highlighted concerns about higher education participation rates across geographical areas and socioeconomic groups, and discussed the strategies employed to tackle these inequities. The Forum extended the Committee's understanding of a range of issues surrounding higher education participation, including: the relationships between higher education participation and school attainment and achievement; best practice approaches to student recruitment and outreach; entry requirements and pathways; student finances and financial support mechanisms; and Indigenous higher education.

Centre for the Study of Higher Education seminar series

Between June and August 2008, two staff members attended a series of seminars hosted by the University of Melbourne's Centre for the Study of Higher Education. *Investing in the Future: Renewing Australian Tertiary Education* included seminars dealing with the aims and functions of higher education, the Review of Australian Higher Education, higher education funding, and performance standards and indicators. Each seminar contributed useful background for the Committee's inquiry.

On 9 June 2009, the executive officer attended a further seminar hosted by the Centre for the Study of Higher Education, *The 2009 Federal Budget: What it Means for Tertiary Education*.

Centre for the Economics of Education and Training Annual National Conference

On 31 October 2008, the research officer attended the Centre for the Economics of Education and Training Annual National Conference. The theme of the conference was ensuring relevance, quality and inclusion in an expanded education and training system. Relevant papers addressed: inclusion in Vocational Education and Training (VET) and

higher education; Australia's qualifications framework; and individual returns from participation in education and training.

Australian Higher Education Congress

In March 2009, three Committee members attended the Australian Higher Education Congress. The Committee was principally interested in papers addressing future directions in regional higher education provision and closer ties between universities and TAFE institutes.

Definitions

Higher education

Under the Australian Qualifications Framework, higher education is classified as a type of post-secondary education leading to the award of associate, bachelor and higher (doctoral or masters) degrees, as well as some types of diploma, advanced diploma, graduate certificate and graduate diploma. While the Committee has not excluded higher degrees or sub-bachelor level qualifications from consideration, the weight of evidence gathered for this inquiry is focused on higher education participation at the level of bachelor degree. This emphasis is reflected in the Committee's report.

In Victoria, most higher education programs are offered by nine public universities, including eight Victorian universities and the Australian Catholic University, which has two Victorian campuses. Victoria's universities are:

- Deakin University
- La Trobe University
- Monash University
- RMIT University
- Swinburne University of Technology
- University of Ballarat
- The University of Melbourne
- Victoria University.

Four Victorian universities—RMIT University, Swinburne University of Technology, the University of Ballarat and Victoria University—are dual or multi-sector institutions, awarding both higher education and VET qualifications. In addition, four Victorian TAFE institutes offer higher education courses, as do a number of interstate universities and more than 50 registered higher education providers.⁸ Charles Sturt University, based in New South Wales, has a campus in Albury and is a significant provider of higher education to Victorian students.

⁸ Department of Innovation, Industry and Regional Development (Victoria), Written Submission, May 2008, 9.

Geographical differences

While geographical differences in participation in higher education are the central focus for this inquiry, geographical characteristics, such as access to university campuses, only partially explain participation differences. The Committee found that geographical differences in higher education participation are linked to a number of interrelated factors, including attainment and achievement at school and the aspiration to attend university. These factors are deeply influenced by underlying differences in individuals' backgrounds, such as socioeconomic status, gender and cultural background. The Committee therefore believes that strategies designed to lift participation rates in under-represented areas are unlikely to be effective if they focus only on issues of distance and accessibility. In this report, the Committee takes a broad view of geographical differences in higher education participation, encompassing the geographical, social, economic and cultural dimensions of the issue.

Rural and regional

In its written submission to the inquiry, Australian Catholic University observed that there are no 'clear and consistent' definitions for the terms 'rural' and 'regional'.⁹ Indeed, research examining higher education participation and geographical location has used a variety of geographical classification systems. For example, a study by Jones compared participation of young people from mainland capital cities, large urban regions, large provincial cities, small provincial cities, other provincial areas and remote areas.¹⁰ In contrast, James' influential studies of rurality and socioeconomic status employed only metropolitan and rural categories.¹¹

The Committee uses the term 'rural and regional' to refer broadly to those areas of Victoria outside of Melbourne, including regional cities, rural towns and remote or isolated communities. In so doing, the Committee does not wish to imply that regional Victoria is homogeneous. While there are some issues that are, to greater or lesser extent, common to most regional and rural areas, there are also substantial differences. Professor Richard Teese, Director, Centre for Post-compulsory Education and Lifelong Learning, The University of Melbourne, emphasised this point:

There is a whole set of issues around country Victoria ... and we should not roll it all into one. We need a good geographically-sensitive view. East Gippsland is not the Mallee et cetera, or the south-west of Victoria.¹²

In its report, the Committee seeks both to describe broad patterns and trends across geographic areas, and to identify issues and concerns particular to specific regions or localities. Where relevant, the report differentiates between, for example, regional centres and smaller or more remote towns. In discussing particular localities, the Committee has deferred to inquiry participants' own descriptions and categorisations of their communities.

⁹ Australian Catholic University, Written Submission, March 2008, 4.

¹⁰ Roger G. Jones, *Education Participation and Outcomes by Geographic Location*, Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth Research Report 26 (Camberwell: Australian Council for Educational Research, 2002).

¹¹ Richard James and others, *Rural and Isolated School Students and their Higher Education Choices: A re-examination of student location, socioeconomic background, and educational advantage and disadvantage*, Commissioned Report 62 (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 1999).

¹² 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, 16.

Socioeconomic status

Throughout the inquiry the Committee received a great deal of evidence about the influence of socioeconomic status on participation in higher education. Socioeconomic status is an abstract and subjective concept that refers to a person's overall position in society. Most commonly, this is defined and measured in terms of occupational prestige, educational attainment and income. Some conceptualise socioeconomic status and socioeconomic advantage and disadvantage more broadly, taking into account ideas such as access to material and social resources and the ability to participate in society.¹³ As a powerful predictor of outcomes in a range of life domains, including education, socioeconomic status is an important concept for policymakers and social researchers.¹⁴

Measurement of socioeconomic status can be undertaken at the level of the individual or the family. However, because individuals and families of a given socioeconomic status are often concentrated in particular areas,¹⁵ socioeconomic status can also be measured for geographic areas. In research and data about higher education participation, analyses of socioeconomic status are often based on such geographic measures. This relationship between socioeconomic status and geographical location meant that socioeconomic status was of great relevance to the Committee's inquiry.

Structure of the report

Chapter 2 sets the scene for the inquiry by outlining the state and federal policy context for the higher education sector. It also summarises existing research findings and the Committee's data analysis regarding differences in higher education participation across geographical areas and population groups. The next five chapters identify and discuss key factors that contribute to participation differences, particularly in relation to initial access to higher education. These factors are: school achievement and completion (Chapter 3); aspirations towards higher education (Chapter 4); university selection and admission processes (Chapter 5); provision of and access to higher education (Chapter 6); and financial considerations (Chapter 7). Chapter 8 looks at students who have commenced a higher education course, examining the factors that impede or support academic success and course completion. Finally, Chapter 9 discusses participation in higher education by Indigenous people.

¹³ Australian Bureau of Statistics, Information Paper, *An Introduction to Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) 2006*, Cat. no. 2039.0 (Canberra: ABS, 2008), 5.

¹⁴ Gary Marks, *The measurement of socioeconomic status and social class in the LSAY project*, Technical Paper 14 (Camberwell: Australian Council for Educational Research, 1999), 2.

¹⁵ Department of Innovation, Industry and Regional Development (Victoria), Written Submission, May 2008, 13.