I wish to make comment on 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.

There is a real disadvantage for the young person from country Victoria to go to a university or TAFE in Melbourne. So many of the courses that are available are only available outside their place of residence. There are many courses such as Music, Drama and Engineering to name a few, which are only available in Melbourne. When Monash Gippsland was offering the engineering course there was a better opportunity of retaining some of our young people in this area. However with a move away to study, many of these people gain work far from home and family. These are the sorts of things that can see the demise of smaller towns, when young people do pick and leave to study and never return. Even so, it is so important that they be given a chance to further their education and gain tertiary qualifications. In many cases there is not even that choice because it is simply out of the question financially. To stay anywhere in Melbourne is expensive. It is not always a matter of course that young people will secure a part time job in Melbourne to help with the costs either. Generally if they have had a retail job during school, they go to Melbourne as an 18 year old and shops are NOT looking for workers of that age.

Personal experience saw us with one daughter living away to study at Monash Clayton, unable to get a part-time job, therefore the cost of her phone, bills, petrol, food, travel and rent all came from us. We had to take out a loan so she could live there. We had three other children at home at the time. One was fortunate enough to be able to study at Monash Gippsland, allowing her to live at home. This, we could cope with within our means. Other issues that arise with tertiary studies and rural students is the whole moving away from home – a place where, in our case it was a warm, loving environment – to a place where they all of a sudden have to know how to shop, what to buy, clean the whole house, cook every day and pay the bills. All these things are new and not everyone slips into that role comfortably. On top of this they miss their family and have to cope with studying-yes, studying, that thing they need to focus on, as well. Come 2007 and we found our two youngest daughters were
heading off to Melbourne to study as well! More cost, more things to find to set up house, more phone bills and petrol costs. One of the girls was doing some instrumental teaching here so had to drive home to teach and head back to be there for her course. The ever increasing cost of petrol meant it was not worth her coming home really as she made little more than that cost. So she endeavoured to find a job in Melbourne. She is still trying! She applies on line and in person – where they will let her- and has not been successful. Being a student means you are older and the hours of availability are not always what an employer is looking for. Our youngest completed a year long course at Ringwood’s Tabor College, and although she had been accepted into university to study (which she deferred at end of 2006) she has not taken it up because of the financial burden she will be on us. Instead she was successful when applying for a traineeship locally, so she can still live at home. We still have one daughter studying in Melbourne with rent, phone, petrol, gas, electricity and food to pay for. The cost is incredibly high.

Why don’t young people from rural areas go on to tertiary education? Because of the financial outlay that is required! There is little assistance given by the government – it is all means tested. This is generally a fair measure under normal circumstances, however having to send one or more children to Melbourne to study are not ‘normal’ circumstances in terms of the family budget. The same couple living in Melbourne sending their children to uni in Melbourne, would not have to find the extra $18,000 at least that is required for a child live away from home. Even in situations where youth allowance is received, the costs in Melbourne are so much more than that rural Victoria.

I think you will find that the inequality for all young people to study comes down to the cost of it. Living at home, compared to living away from home. The cost factor is a major deterrent. To live at home, there is no rent, no food to purchase (usually parents are willing to give food and shelter at the very least to their university students!), no household bills to pay and not the responsibly of running a household. Living away from home is a huge step, despite the cost factor…moving from family and friends and a known environment into a place where the pace is hectic, having to shop for food, cook meals every night, clean, wash and iron, cope with public transport which is a frustrating mystery and the cost of living is higher than where students have come from. All these issues factor into why rural students do not go to university. The intelligence of the student is not the issue – so many, more that capable, students do not attend uni simply because they do not wish to be a burden on the family, or they know that it is out of the question financially.

We live in a sad, sorry country where the people in power – ie members of government – who have the opportunity to shape and mould this country, have no great concept of what it is not to have money when you need it. Most politicians would not understand what it is to have just
enough money from pay to pay (sometimes not even enough!). There are so many who are in that situation. Just because there are children from families like that does not mean they should not have the opportunity to study.

It will cost the government one way or another – either by increased youth allowances to ALL those who must move away from home to study, or increased funds into the courses offered at universities that are not Melbourne based. I live in Traralgon, we are fortunate as there is a Monash University campus just 25 minutes away. However, year after year, course after course is being taken away from the university. A course that one of our daughters was going to do was whipped out from Gippsland, so that meant looking at Melbourne again. Acknowledge that there will be a cost, but do not shove this under the table or put it in the too hard basket – be proactive at making a positive change, because you, as politicians, at least have the chance to do that!

***and a personal note on our experience which I believe warrants your attention***

Two things that concerned me when inquiring about youth allowance for my daughters which I think should be noted…firstly I was told that if I signed a statement to say that I was ‘kicking my daughter out of home, that we could not live in the same house’, then she would have been able to apply for and receive some benefits. There was no way I would lie and make such a statement and I was very angry that option had been openly suggested to me. And, recently I inquired as to what benefit our daughter might receive after she is married, and what exactly did ‘living away from home or independently’ mean, as our daughter had been in Melbourne studying for twelve months, I was asked “Is she living with her partner?” “No,” I said, she does not believe in living together until she is married.” I was told, “Oh, if they had been living together, she would have been able to receive benefits.” I was once again very angry to think that because our daughter has the values and morals she has, that she is penalised. This place we live is a sad one when the only way to get benefits is to lie or compromise your values. This is an issue that I believe needs to be looked at.

This submission was supplied by Ms Kerryn Conabere, Traralgon