CORRECTED VERSION
OUTER SUBURBAN INTERFACE SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into liveability options in outer suburban Melbourne

Melbourne—16 April 2012

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Witnesses
Swinburne University:
Ms L. Brown, Deputy Vice-Chancellor (TAFE); and
Mr A. Dempster, Principal Adviser, Office of the Vice-Chancellor.
The CHAIR—I would like to offer a welcome to our two witnesses from Swinburne University. The contribution that you make to this hearing today is protected by parliamentary privilege. Anything you say pertaining to the interaction we have outside of this setting today and in this time is not afforded parliamentary privilege. What you contribute is going to be recorded, and a hard copy of that will be available to you in two weeks for spelling and typographical error identification, but not to the actual syntax or format of your contribution. If I could invite Ms Linda Brown in the first instance to start off by stating for the record your name, your designation, the place you work and its physical address please, and the same for Mr Dempster.

Ms BROWN—Linda Brown, I am the deputy vice-chancellor and director of TAFE at Swinburne University, six campuses, although my office is in Hawthorn.

Mr DEMPSTER—I am Andrew Dempster from the Office of the Vice-Chancellor at Swinburne University, also based at the Hawthorn campus. May I start the opening statement?

The CHAIR—Yes, we invite you to do that now.

Mr DEMPSTER—Thank you very much, Chair. If I could say that in addition to managing Swinburne's TAFE operations, Linda is also responsible for the university's social inclusion strategy, the outreach work that we do to lift aspiration and to make tertiary education opportunities available to as many people as possible. I am sure that Linda's expertise in that will be of value to the committee in its deliberations today.

While we understand that the focus of today's hearings will be on Swinburne's engagement in the Yarra Ranges, as this is likely the only time that Swinburne will be attending a hearing, can I in this opening statement provide you with a sense of Swinburne's mission and the areas in which the university operates. I will make some comments and then hand over to Linda. Swinburne is a dual sector university offering courses both in TAFE and in higher education. We have consistently been ranked as one of the top 500 universities in the world as measured by the academic ranking of world universities. Our strength in educational provision lies in the ability to offer courses from certificate I, right up to PhD level, and in the focus on sciences, engineering, IT, design and business.

Our main campus with both TAFE and higher education offerings, as we mentioned, is in Hawthorn. Other campuses are in the Melbourne CBD, Prahran, Wantirna, Croydon, Lilydale and Healesville. There is also one overseas campus at Sarawak in Malaysia which provides our students with opportunities to study abroad as part of their degree. We feel that Swinburne University is well positioned to contribute to the much needed growth in tertiary education provision required in the outer south-east of Melbourne, and the outer east of Melbourne, particularly through our campuses in Wantirna, Croydon, Lilydale and in Healesville. The outer east and outer south-east of Melbourne have higher education participation rates which are well below the Victorian average, and also below the rates for the western region of Melbourne which is often seen as an area of extreme disadvantage.
It is important to note that the outer east, outer south-east and western areas of Melbourne, the participation in vocational education and training is higher than the Victorian average, and we feel that these high rates of participation in VET present an excellent opportunity to create new and innovative higher education offerings and pathways for these learners. This is where we feel that Swinburne's dual sector model provision offers some real advantages by increasing the provision of education through these three key pathways—school to TAFE, school to higher education, and TAFE to higher education. Because of the pathways that are offered between TAFE and higher education programs at Swinburne, more of our TAFE graduates articulate to a bachelor degree compared to the statewide average.

We were the first university in Australia to offer a guaranteed entry scheme which gives TAFE students guaranteed entry into an undergraduate program when they enrol in a Swinburne TAFE diploma or advanced diploma. Our students receive credit for their diploma or advanced diploma studies, fast-tracking them into the later stages of an undergraduate degree. Swinburne students who have started TAFE and then progressed to university perform just as well as, or sometimes even better than, year 12 direct entry students.

Before I hand over to Linda to speak in more detail about the programs and initiatives that Swinburne has been pursuing locally, let me speak briefly about Swinburne's Lilydale campus down the road. The Lilydale campus provides a range of higher education and TAFE programs across multiple fields of study, including health, hospitality and tourism, business, community services, information and communications technology, and communications. The campus supports a good mix of local TAFE and higher education students, as well as international students who are looking for a high-quality educational experience beyond the Melbourne CBD and built-up areas. In fact last year there were around 400 international students studying right here at Lilydale.

Over the past two years, Lilydale has grown its provision, both in TAFE and higher education, and I have some figures here for the committee. In 2009 there were 1,310 TAFE students at Lilydale; that increased to about 1,550 last year. Over the same periods these TAFE students studied more intensively. The total number of student contact hours increased from 431,000 to 711,000. In higher education, the total number of students at Lilydale increased from 1,386 to 1,479 based on an equivalent full-time student load. We should say that this year is the first year that full contestability has been introduced in the higher education market, and likewise in the Victorian TAFE system there is contestability for TAFE places as well. This means that if there is greater need at Lilydale campus then we are certainly in a position to offer more places, both in higher education and in TAFE. Likewise, it means that students in this area have greater opportunities to study elsewhere if they receive offers from other universities that serve eastern Melbourne. We are certainly monitoring the effect of that greater contestability, both in higher education and in VET.

The CHAIR—Is that affecting you significantly in terms of your interim planning and projections?

Mr DEMPSTER—Yes. It is probably too early to tell what the effects are right now. This is the first full year, as I mentioned, that there is an uncapped environment in higher education. We will certainly be looking this year to see how students respond, whether there will be an increase in students coming to Lilydale or whether the demand will be less, but like every other university in Australia we are monitoring to see what the effect of these changes will be on our student demand.

The CHAIR—Having a look at your demand in the general sense, outside of the effects of contestability, especially within the TAFE sector, the impact of less numbers coming in, in terms of international students, make a—
Mr DEMPSTER—Yes, that is right. Again, like a lot of other Victorian educational providers, Swinburne has seen fewer international students last year than we had a few years ago. The federal government late last year announced some changes to the visa requirements which we think will be attractive to international students in the future, but we have not seen the full effect of those recent changes flowing through, but we would see there being good potential for growth in international student numbers once again, once those changes take effect.

The CHAIR—Because you are also competing against the pressures the high Australian dollar brings to bear, have you been aggressive in more or less differentiating beyond the dollar?

Mr DEMPSTER—The dollar is certainly one of those factors. There is a lot of debate as to whether the dollar is the big driver in impacting on demand in international education. One way of looking at it is that it makes education more expensive for those who come here to study it. But likewise if they are also earning, as many international students do—they work part-time during their time here—the value of that is worth more to them as well. It definitely has had an impact and Swinburne is not alone in that, but it is only one of a number of factors that is causing our international student demand to shift.

The CHAIR—I would be very interested to hear now your plan for drawing people's attention to the benefits that one could derive from the educational experience—drawing those people from where aspiration does not prevail within the family setting or in generations past, that it is not something that people have benefited from being handed down—in terms of how we can engage those people not imbued with the importance of higher education or the vocational sector.

Mr DEMPSTER—I will hand over to Linda.

The CHAIR—Thank you.

Ms BROWN—Andrew is going to hand over to me now really to talk about some of these specific initiatives that Swinburne has been working on already, especially around raising aspirations in family around generational attainment in education. I have left a couple of documents as well to look at later, one is the university's Social Inclusion Action Plan which I am incredibly proud of, because that is not only about participation and raising participation, it is also about supporting students achievement. I will talk about one of the projects around that that specifically relates to Lilydale in a minute, and the other one is a tool that we have done nationally for students who have not gone to university before called U2Uni which is a series of resources that the students can do prior to going to university, or when they are thinking about it, to familiarise themselves with it and then learn some of the unwritten rules around university to help them. I have left you these two things to move forward with.
I would specifically like to talk about three initiatives that we have been doing to raise aspiration and visibility around education around the Yarra Ranges area. The first one really is working in a much stronger way with secondary schools. We have been doing a lot of work with some of the secondary school partnerships in this area, looking at better skill provision, looking at scholarship provision for students who want to go through to higher education, and also doing things like working with the U2Uni book at a local level. We have meetings on a regular basis with a cluster of schools around about Yarra Valley specifically at the campus, bring them into the campus and familiarise them with that area and that environment before they make a choice about where—

The CHAIR—What would you define as your catchment in terms of those relationships with the schools?

Ms BROWN—Really we have started working now down as low as year 7, and our catchment, as we have said, we have a whole suite of campuses across the outer metro area and Melbourne, if you like, with Lilydale, Croydon, Wantirna, all down that area, we are working with the schools across the whole area of that outer Melbourne. It is really interesting, we have done a piece of work that shows that students, more specifically the higher education students, will move roughly up to 30 or 40 kilometres for good provision. Students tend to move for good educational provision.

The CHAIR—From the Lilydale campus perspective, in terms of the townships—we are looking within the boundaries of the Shire of Yarra Ranges specifically at the moment, in some of the more remote and isolated townships within that area—is there communication that far out?

Ms BROWN—Yes, absolutely. I will talk about one of the other projects that will give you an example. One of the other projects that we have been doing this year is specifically around the Healesville area. Some of the things we are doing there is we are working with Healesville High and we have given them a bucket of money, if you like, for some projects to improve retention of indigenous students, and working with indigenous students to try to bring them further up the higher education ladder and to degrees. We do quite well with participation in VET at this point in time, but we really want to move people across from VET to higher education.

One of the other projects that we are doing up at Healesville is in the inner area where we are working with a group of indigenous students using competencies around IT skills and digital storytelling. We are doing a lot of very specific, community based projects in some of the outlying areas to try to increase participation and move people from school to VET, VET to higher education. Even one of the other projects that we did which was incredibly significant for this area was the Bushfire Brokers project which took in some of the Yarra Ranges areas and townships, as well as some of the alternative shires around about where we worked with over 400 people across the bushfire affected area to help them get a qualification. We know there is research that shows that if you can give somebody in the family a qualification, the children are 20 per cent more likely to go on and do a qualification too. Around social inclusion strategy, specifically at Swinburne, we are not only targeting an individual participant, to try to get the student to come to VET, and VET to higher education, we are also working in a very intimate way through a lot of these community projects with the family, with the community, with the surrounding area to try to increase participation. There are about six or seven projects highlighted in that Social Inclusion Action Plan that show the way we are trying to increase that engagement.

The CHAIR—That is really commendable. We look forward to taking the detail of that.
Ms BROWN—Thank you for that. It is very important for this area. There was a report that was done, which I think is also important for the committee, by Professor Kwong Lee Dow that was done for the state government and we obviously participated very highly in that report. It looks at all of outer metro and looks at the south-east corridor. What Professor Dow was trying to address in that report was about the low participation rate of students going on to higher education, and more importantly, I feel, the high deferral rates of students who had been given a place for higher education and were not taking these places up. Swinburne has worked on a couple of initiatives to specifically address some of these issues.

One of them is not in this area but we hopefully get funding and support for it in this area next, where we got a partnership through the Regional Partnerships Facilitation Fund that is supported through the state government to work in the Hume area with the Adult and Community Education providers in supporting them getting students up through associate degrees, and then from associate degrees into degrees. This is a one-off project where a university is working with community education to try to facilitate these pathways in that engagement.

The CHAIR—Do you have a typical age cohort?

Ms BROWN—No, it goes across.

The CHAIR—It goes across.

Ms BROWN—If you look at Swinburne's engagement in higher education, it tends to be kind of a third, a third, a third. We tend to have a third of VCE high-achieving students coming straight from year 12 into our programs; a third of our students tend to come from non-traditional TAFE programs or alternative education into Swinburne; the other third tend to come from industry, and people who are working are coming back through workforce development skills. Our range is enormous. We have a lot of non-traditional entry coming into our provision out in these campuses.

In summary, I would like to leave you with the feel and really the evidence that Swinburne absolutely is about quality. As Andrew said we are in the top 500 in the world. We were training provider of the year out of 4,600 two years ago nationally. We have the highest star rating for educational quality in the Good Universities Guide. Across VET, higher education and research we absolutely are up there, but we really are about quality and we are doing an incredible amount of localised work with specific cohorts to get them engaged in education across specifically the outer south-east and also our metro campuses.

Ms McLEISH—My question is a quick one and it probably refers to all of your outer suburban campuses, but in particular here you mentioned earlier that there were 400 international students and also you mentioned people would travel 30 to 40 kilometres. I am probably interested in those that come internationally. Where do they stay?

Ms BROWN—We have accommodation on Lilydale campus which is an incredible benefit for us, so we have student residences on the Lilydale campus.
Ms McLEISH—Is that full?

Ms BROWN—Yes, they are full.

The CHAIR—What happens with all the unmet demand then in terms of accommodation? Is that something that makes it difficult for people to become a student and look at their viability through the course? Is accommodation an issue?

Ms BROWN—I think accommodation is probably more of an issue for us at this point in time in the metro area around the Hawthorn campus. Because we have now entered into, as Andrew said, this contestable market, this year is really a year where we have to watch and we can see where students are making choices and where they are going to. Now they have more opportunity to go to their first choice, rather than their second choice or third choice. At this point in time there is not a great deal of unmet demand from international students at the Lilydale campus.

The CHAIR—Are local students requiring accommodation, that it might be too difficult for them to commute? Would you get local students who want to avoid a 40 kilometre commute?

Ms BROWN—we have certainly been able to accommodate all the local students that want to come at this point in time within our facility.

The CHAIR—We have a couple more minutes to give you a little bit of a finalisation, an encapsulation, from either of you.

Ms BROWN—As I understand, some of the other things we have done at this campus to facilitate demand is—as you can see it is working in the numbers that we have seen—we have put nursing in Lilydale campus for the first time last year which has been a great success. We obviously did a lot of work looking at the local area, the need for the local area, what other universities and TAFEs were offering in other areas that we were not duplicating, but we then put nursing on Lilydale for the first time and we have over 200 students there. It is growing incredibly well. There are more local students coming for that nursing program to that campus. It is certainly a big success as well with some of the local schools around our guaranteed entry scheme. That has been a good success story over the last year for Lilydale. We have invested quite a lot in some nursing labs and facilities out there. It has certainly changed the dynamic of the campus a little bit which is nice.

The CHAIR—that is excellent. I commend you on that. What other faculty—through faculty review—would you forecast in terms of looking at other unmet demands. You have used nursing as an example in terms of review of the offerings.
Ms BROWN—At the moment what we have been doing is working a lot with business and talking to businesses about what they need. One of the other things which is quite successful in our Lilydale campus—we were smiling about recycling earlier—is our own sustainability strategy. We own the National Centre for Sustainability in Australia which is fantastic in the VET space and in the higher education space. A lot of our landscape design and some of these other programs are growing very well at this point in time. That is important to the local environment and it is important to the make-up of the Yarra shire. We have been looking at what we offer out there and trying to match it up a little bit with what the industry has. They are courses that we are running at the moment on that campus.

The CHAIR—Is there the uptake for that?

Ms BROWN—Yes, and remember a lot of these people, a lot of the core that we are getting, already work too and are wanting to upskill, use a workforce development strategy. What we are seeing is in areas like landscape design and areas of sustainability, carbon accounting; people who are already qualified as accountants that might be wanting to do an ancillary skill to get more skills for their job. That is more of an upskilling strategy for people who are already in employment. One of the interesting statistics for the committee is that we have more part-time students on the Lilydale campus than we do in any other of our campuses which is an interesting statistic. We have a lot of returning-to-learn students and a lot of people who are upskilling and coming to the Lilydale campus.

The CHAIR—Do you see yourself enlarging that sustainability offering so that you stand as a centre of excellence in that particular area?

Ms BROWN—I think we have a two-pronged approach to our sustainability strategy. Some of it is about ancillary qualifications like carbon accounting et cetera and we are certainly leading the way around that curriculum nationally. We were the representative for education on Gillard's Green Skills Plan which was fantastic for us. The other side is about embedding sustainability and all the qualifications that we currently offer. As well as a new package of qualifications that we are developing and delivering, a lot of them are in the VET space because it's a skill base and cohort. We are also looking at training our teachers in sustainability so you can do more traditional programs. They are putting the principles into the delivery as it stands now. It is a two-pronged approach if you like.

The CHAIR—Do you have any other comments to make, Mr Dempster?

Mr DEMPSTER—Given the time pressures the committee is facing, I am happy to leave it as it is.

The CHAIR—we are very appreciative of you coming along today and providing such a stimulating and thought-provoking contribution for us to think about. I am pleased that you brought that supplementary material as well because of the time constraints. It may come about that through our executive officer that the committee communicates with you on various aspects, particularly some of the initiatives in those areas of specialisation. We are particularly interested in that, and we congratulate you on those initiatives. Thank you for your time with us.
Ms BROWN—Thank you very much.

Mr DEMPSTER—Thank you, Chair.

Witnesses withdrew.

Hearing suspended.