CORRECTED VERSION

OUTER SUBURBAN/INTERFACE SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into growing the suburbs — infrastructure and business development in outer suburban Melbourne

Broadmeadows — 6 March 2012

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Witnesses
Mr D. Ensor, vice-president (operations)/chief operating officer, and La Trobe University
Ms R. Harris, director, planning and institutional performance
The CHAIR — We will move into the formal part of our hearing introduction today. Everything you have to say will be recorded by Hansard, and a hard copy of a transcript will be available for your perusal for any typographical or spelling errors. It is important for you to know that while you are in this place at this time in front of this hearing your input is protected by parliamentary privilege. This is done to encourage open discussion and unfettered comments, if need be. However, that parliamentary privilege would not extend to outside of this hearing and its physical confines, in another time or another date, even if the topics were related.

I want to extend a welcome to Mr David Ensor and Ms Robyn Harris from La Trobe University. We are looking forward to hearing from you on matters of such strategically important direct relevance to the reference that we have in terms of growing our suburbs. I understand that you have a presentation to start the process, and I invite you to start on that presentation with any opening remarks.

Overheads shown.

Mr ENSOR — Thank you very much and thank you for the opportunity, Chair, to present to this inquiry. Apologies from our Vice-Chancellor, Professor John Dewar, who is in Canberra this week, otherwise he would have attended. We will keep the introductory comments brief, which will allow us more time for discussion, except just to make some key points about La Trobe and the region. I will highlight why this is relevant in a minute. We employ more than 3000 people. There are 32000 students— with more than 5500 international students. We have a budget of just under $600 million, and we are a strategic hub for Melbourne’s north as well as central and northern Victoria.

Some key achievements, which are again relevant to where I want to take the discussion, include a $300 million AgriBio centre, the largest agribio sciences research facility in the Southern Hemisphere, in partnership with the Department of Primary Industries; a $95 million La Trobe Institute for Molecular Science, funded by the federal government, which is a key research facility currently being constructed at the Melbourne campus; and a $30 million Cooperative Research Centre for Biomarker Translation.

The University has a very strong social agenda. It is committed to what is in its founding mission and its Act: to serve the community of Victoria. It has a very strong commitment to access, which goes back to its founding days, and a very strong commitment to research that is relevant to its communities. In the research rankings, it is currently ranked in the top 500 world universities. It has an important role in Melbourne’s north, alongside what are current infrastructure investments, to support a number of issues relating to low levels of higher education participation, to contribute to world-class research which benefits local communities and to leverage off extensive land-holdings to support the development of community infrastructure.

To La Trobe’s role in the region: it is important to understand the nature of its commitment to its key partnerships with local government, TAFEs and schools. We have with the local governments in Melbourne’s north, the RDA and NORTH Link embarked on a process to look at a strategy for Melbourne’s north that would equip it to effectively navigate what the next 10, 15, 20 years are likely to put before it. Just as other regions such as G21 have come together around a strategic focus that separates that region of greater Melbourne from other regions and positions it on the world stage, we feel there is an opportunity and a need for regions within the metropolitan area to develop a strategy and a vision around which very positively industry can grow, education can grow and community wellbeing can be developed. We think that a locally based university has a critical role to play in that.

The research strengths and the recent announcement by the state government regarding the Northern Bioscience Precinct again positions the University to support what we see as a critical role of helping a community prepare for a new economy. The development of bioscience-related employment opportunities keeps our graduates local instead of graduating students who then move off to other regions of employment. We see this as a parallel strategy of working with the community, working with business and working with government to grow local employment that will strengthen the region.

We also understand we have a critical role in terms of supporting the research in the areas. In this particular region we understand that outer metropolitan communities will face particular challenges around commuting, journeying to work and issues of migration, religion, health and education. We understand a university’s role in supporting a community to develop a future for itself positively in relation to all of those things. We understand we have a responsibility to this region, which is an outer region, to focus our research efforts to the challenges and opportunities of the community and to provide that as a resource to state government. I will pass on to Robyn Harris, who will take us through some key challenges we face in trying to do that.
Ms HARRIS — I think there are two that we would like to bring to the attention of the group. The educational attainment of these areas — you would be well aware — needs attention. I think that data slide really demonstrates that writ large. La Trobe is very alive to its role in supporting and lifting educational aspiration and attainment for students in this region in particular.

The way we are going about doing that is through partnerships with local TAFEs and schools and making sure we are working with early secondary school students to lift their educational aspiration and build pathways for them to aspire to tertiary education and then further on to higher education. The university has also embarked on a major curriculum reform project which is looking to strengthen the graduate capabilities of students and demonstrate to them their employability and their ability to contribute to communities.

The second particular challenge we wanted to speak briefly about is in relation to public transport. The university has plans to grow, and we have the capacity and space to grow. One of the major barriers to that is the public transport infrastructure. The university is doing a considerable amount of work to understand those issues and develop a plan for itself in the ways in which it can invest and use its own resources to overcome some of those transport barriers.

We would like to come back to state government midyear with more concrete proposals once our own thinking and research has developed. But our own research of students shows that public transport is a major reason that they will cite when considering deferring their studies. It is a particular barrier for students currently from these areas travelling to the Melbourne campus of La Trobe. For example, students in Broadmeadows here have a typical 84-minute journey to Bundoora and around three modes of transport. I can speak authoritatively as someone who just lives down the road and say it is a 20 to 30-minute car journey. We know that is a particular barrier for students.

This research we have undertaken over a number of years shows that less than a third of our new undergraduate students use public transport to get to campus. It is a cost barrier for students and a real difficulty.

Ms McLEISH — Sorry, I did not hear how many.

Ms HARRIS — It is less than one-third. We have started to do some analysis of where our current students reside and the major transport routes for them. We have commissioned an external piece of work to start informing our own thinking, and we will be keen to discuss further with the state government how we might be able to work together in partnership to help progress those issues.

Mr ENSOR — In conclusion — and to just make the point — we see public transport as being a key barrier. The public transport threads all seem to go into the middle of the city, so it makes commuter suburbs out of anything beyond immediate places of employment. Public transport that cuts across the city is critical, we feel, to development. The other issue is the one on developing hubs and nodes of alternative employment and alternative education in the outer suburban interface areas such as what we are in — that is, a global learning village which has a vision of bringing the best type of education to students in this region. We see partnerships as critical, and we see a review of transport as being critical to addressing the issues alongside the focus of research efforts of a university in this region to help develop alternative employment opportunities and address challenges and opportunities of the communities that we serve.

The CHAIR — Mr Ensor, I can see there is an obvious lack of public transport other than the hub and spoke model that sets out the historic expansion of Melbourne in the first place. Beyond a lack of transport that satisfies the need to move from A to B inside of, say, 30 minutes, is there an additional barrier in that people do not have the opportunity for engagement and appreciation of the worth, or how enjoyable tertiary study is or the personal opportunities beyond that?

Mr ENSOR — Exactly.

The CHAIR — Those things are beyond physical infrastructure, but there is a lack of awareness perhaps and the value that is apportioned to it.

Mr ENSOR — It is a key issue. You are quite correct; we have omitted to mention it, but that is quite central to what we do in exposing students in schools to a university. For that reason we have a key partnership with the Melbourne Heart soccer team in Melbourne’s north.
Mr ONDARCHIE — Yes! Go the Heart!

Mr ENSOR — At the end of the day it is really the main focus of the relationship. We have just appointed Mick Malthouse as our first Vice-Chancellor’s Fellow.

The CHAIR — Yes, I saw that.

Mr ENSOR — The fundamental basis of those two relationships is to say, ‘Mick Malthouse dropped out of school at 16. He is terrified of coming to university’. He has stated that. It is not a place to see as foreign. Those two cases, Mick Malthouse and Melbourne Heart, are two streams of a strategy we used to penetrate the various school systems to say, ‘Come on to our campus and engage in activities’, to put our students into classrooms alongside teachers to work with students around study projects.

We have some key partnerships with schools. We try to link curriculum back into the schools. It is a community issue; it is not a university issue or a schools issue. It is a community issue that we have to contribute to in the raising of the aspirations. We have a very high proportion — one of the highest in the state — of first-in-family-to-tertiary-education students. That sort of happened through both positional issues as opposed to real strategic interventions.

We have now engaged in strategic interventions with schools and partnerships to address that very issue, which is a significant community issue. The other one sitting within that is the teaching of maths and science and the number of students who do not carry through maths and science to the end of their school career, which limits a whole heap of career options for them. To the extent that that is a unique problem in this community I am not sure, but it is one we are acutely aware of.

The CHAIR — In terms of the relationship with TAFEs — let us say Kangan TAFE in the first instance — and the programs and qualifications that they have on offer, is there an easy entry point for people who have accomplished, let us say, an advanced diploma and therefore that articulates into credits in a degree program and that is actively promoted as an alternative means? Sometimes TAFEs are a place of second choice for people. They have people well into their 20s embracing tertiary study for the first time, for instance, and not just there being an emphasis on school leavers.

Mr ENSOR — We see that TAFE, as with an organisation like the Global Learning Village, are key partners in providing a channel into higher education. There is no one channel that is better than another. We know that TAFE students coming into university perform better than many students coming out of school. They know what they want, there is a maturity about their pursuits, and they have a practical flavour to their interests. We have to be careful in terms of the maintenance of our currency of qualifications, so we do not offer blanket articulation from TAFE programs into our degrees, but we are actively pursuing relationships with TAFEs including Kangan Batman, and through a recent visit to this facility we have pursued additional partnerships. Our Vice-Chancellor has prioritised it as a key strategy that he wants to pursue. He has been in the job two months but he has nailed his colours to the mast in terms of this being a critical pathway for people who do not find university as being familiar and who are not likely to proceed through a typical school-leaver university entry pathway.

Ms HARRIS — In addition to articulation arrangements the University is increasingly establishing tertiary education programs which are specific qualifications or awards that allows students to enter into the university, and those arrangements are taught in conjunction between staff of the university and staff of selected TAFE colleges. There is an emerging relationship with Kangan Batman around such a scheme.

The CHAIR — If a visionary person or organisation said they wanted to build a technology park — let us say ‘regional’ — which may in whole or in part fit within the boundaries of the Hume City Council so that it might have a wider reach, would La Trobe be party to discussions for the establishment of a park so that there might be a special purpose campus with one area of specialised courses that actually fed that technology precinct or park?
Mr ENSOR — We certainly would explore that. I think up to this point the University has had one of the highest low SES student retention rates in Australia and a lot of that has to do with the campus experience and student support. Hitherto we have been fairly focused on a campus experience. We understand that not every student wants to come to our campus; mature-age learners want to learn in different ways. We would certainly see a discussion about a technology park as being part of a discussion about who are the learners who would want to come to that park and how can we work with them. In the context of a broader commitment to helping transform the economies and employment opportunities in Melbourne’s north, we would definitely be prepared to have that discussion. The nature of the commitment would need to be a negotiation around what the demand is, what the longer term community benefit is and what our strengths are. We know we have clear strengths in biosciences; we are ranked fairly close to the top university in the country; we are well above world standard in that. We can help contribute to the development of a bioscience industry in Melbourne’s north. A tech park would need to be married to what our research strengths are to be a meaningful partnership. We certainly want to explore that.

Ms GRALEY — I have a campus of Monash University in my electorate, the Berwick campus, and one of my pet projects at the moment is making sure that more students from my local area can actually go to university, access their local university, and so I am very interested in the SALT program. Maybe you would like to expand on that and any other sort of mentoring-tutoring programs that you may do, because from my experience you really have to get these kids at a young age in order to lift their aspirations and get them to aim to go to university.

Ms HARRIS — The SALT program is a coordinated program the university has with selected schools in the La Trobe region where we have a range of different engagements with those schools which is negotiated individually with each school. There are programs that focus on developing the teachers — the leadership group in the school and teacher development — as well as programs provided to the students of those schools. Typically the nature of each relationship is different because it is negotiated with each individual school, but there will always be some component of professional development for the staff of the school as well as programs for the students. The programs are usually focused around years 9, 10, 11 and 12, and we are starting to think that we actually need to work with years even earlier than year 9.

There is a range of different activities and programs. Quite often it will involve bringing academic staff from the university into the schools, giving students a taste or exposure to different and broader experiences than they might otherwise have, and bringing the students of those schools onto the campus for hands-on interaction, which is all about getting them familiar with what tertiary study is all about. We also have a special bonus scheme for students who have come from the SALT schools; students who might not otherwise qualify through their performance in VCE can be granted bonus points if they are coming from a SALT scheme, which allows them access to university where they would not otherwise have gained access.

We have just recently done a study on the performance of those SALT students once they reach university and it shows that they perform at least as well as, if not better than, students coming from straight VCE on the basis of ATAR, and we will be undertaking a longitudinal study of those students to make sure that we are retaining them at equivalent rates as well. So far the evidence suggests that it is a worthwhile and very workable scheme for the students and it is positive for the university.

The CHAIR — I am not sure whether there is any material focusing on this aspect, but some schools are embracing the notion of uncoupling year 9 students from the student body and sending them to another location. It can vary; it can be a rural setting or a city campus. Is there any longitudinally based material to show that there is a benefit at that crucial time in the secondary experience?

Ms HARRIS — Not that I am personally aware of, no. But the University is trying to explore all sorts of different models. The challenge for us is being able to build that evidence base to be able to confirm that our interventions and activities are providing benefits to the community.

Mr ONDARCHIE — There has been a bit of a perception in the north over many years that something sinister happens behind those trees on Plenty Road and nobody really knew what happened behind La Trobe University, so I must commend you on your involvement in things like SALT and Tournament of Minds that bring children into La Trobe and get them to have a look around. You have grown your community involvement and you are particularly aware of the different languages and cultures in the north as well. Could you talk to us a little bit about the strategy of embracing Melbourne Heart? I might add Melbourne Heart looks like being the only Melbourne team that will make the A-League finals, so those who follow the other team should know Melbourne
Heart looks like they are going to make it. Could you just talk to us about the strategy in embracing them? Secondly, what have you got out of that, and more importantly what is next? What is next for that involvement with growing Melbourne Heart and La Trobe’s relationship through the community?

Mr ENSOR — I think ‘around the trees’ was well put. In terms of the trees, if you get past the trees, there is always the moat. We know that we have a challenge in terms of our infrastructure to open up the place. It is currently very difficult to penetrate from an infrastructure point of view.

In terms of Melbourne Heart, it was a meeting of spirits in the sense that the university is in a new phase of growth. It has fairly strong principles around community involvement and development of community. Melbourne Heart, in its infancy, was an idea, also with fairly strong commitment to community building. It wanted to be a football club of people in a real sense, not just a ‘Sign up your membership’ sense. We saw that it would be of benefit to Melbourne’s north to have a football team based in Melbourne’s north, so we recognised the benefit of working hard to attract that to the north as opposed to it going to other regions of greater Melbourne that were actively pursuing it. We also knew that from a research point of view, to help achieve elite status, the players and coaches could work alongside our various disciplines of physiotherapy, podiatry —

Mr ONDARCHIE — Health sciences.

Mr ENSOR — And health sciences. We saw a benefit to our students and researchers, and, most importantly, the benefit we identified was that it would help to break down the misconception that universities are distant, inaccessible places. We saw soccer — or football — being a common currency in Melbourne’s north, probably more so than AFL and particularly with younger kids. We saw that sport and a new team developing into Melbourne’s north created a bridge and a common currency that connected us with them, so we saw it as a key pillar in our engagement with potential students.

In terms of ‘what next’, we certainly want to consolidate Melbourne Heart in Melbourne’s north. We know there is key infrastructure that we need to jointly develop to consolidate their position in Melbourne’s north. We know it is critical, and we know there is key infrastructure that has to be developed to help them and help us reach that next level of partnership. That is currently an issue for development. We also know that research is not a static thing. Problems they encounter and problems that individual players present are a moving feast. The research agenda is a changing one. We see that there is a vibrant relationship. We see that we would be extending their involvement in our school’s engagement strategy, taking them into schools with students in a subtle way — not too over the top — to bring potential students and the university together and bring kids onto campus into football clinics. It has been a mutual trajectory of us refining our mission and them growing theirs.

Mr ONDARCHIE — It seems to me you are getting a lot more community people attending La Trobe as a result of that.

Mr ENSOR — Absolutely.

Mr ONDARCHIE — Are the facilities appropriate for that?

Mr ENSOR — Our facilities are fairly limited. We are talking about an A-league team essentially playing in a marsh. It is a poor facility that, as I said, we are hoping to upgrade. It is critical to retain them in Melbourne’s north, so we are both actively pursuing that.

Ms McLEISH — My question is a bit more about demand. How hard do you have to market yourself to ensure enrolments? I guess I am asking if there are enough people out there banging out the doors, trying to get in.

Ms HARRIS — I think the answer to that is that over recent years La Trobe has always met its load targets, so we have been able to achieve the growth we have planned. But we are in a very different environment now, as you perhaps understand, where the capped environment for students coming into universities has been lifted, so there is even more potential for institutions to grow should they choose to. I think there is a challenge for all universities, but La Trobe in particular, to be able to manage and maintain that growth across the different faculties and the different discipline areas that we have.
I think the short answer is that so far we have been successful. A number of courses are very oversubscribed. Our dentistry program in Bendigo and a lot of our health science programs are oversubscribed. If we were able to provide more places for those courses, we would be able to fill them. There are other pockets of courses where the demand is on the softer side, and what we are trying to do in our strategic assessment of the uncapped environment and the community requirements and market demand is to make sure that we have a strengthened portfolio of coursework across the board. A major focus for us is developing our postgraduate coursework offerings, which have not performed to the level that we would like. That is a major strategic initiative for the university at the moment — to extend our postgraduate coursework offerings and grow that side of our coursework offerings.

Ms McLEISH — I see from the slideshow that you have 26 per cent of overseas students. With projected growth, where are they all going to live? I know you have residential colleges on campus. Is the demand for that full, and are people looking for shared housing accommodation or alternative private colleges?

Mr ENSOR — The on-campus accommodation is not quite full, so there is a mix of on-campus and the private rental market. You often find that country kids and international students will often go into the colleges for the first year and maybe the second, and then their friendship groups will form and they realise they do not like someone looking over their shoulder, so they will move off into the rental market. We know we need to develop additional student accommodation, and we are in discussion with partners to do that. We see it as a natural mix, bearing in mind that people are going to choose where they want to stay between the rental market and the more supported on-campus accommodation.

The CHAIR — With the cohort of international students and through alumni organisations and direction setting in terms of postgraduate offerings and so forth, do you actually have a retention strategy, and do those students then apply for permanent residency in Australia and alter their status and therefore apply their skills locally?

Mr ENSOR — Yes.

The CHAIR — Do they go back home, and therefore we can establish important links and bridges into new marketplaces and new societies?

Mr ENSOR — I think we have a valuable international network of alumni and understand the importance of those alumni groups to the university and the region. They range from everything from the Crown Prince of Malaysia and the Crown Princess, who studied together and met each at Glenn College on our campus and who have a very shared love for Melbourne’s north and the university, through to business people in China, India et cetera. There is a broad range of alumni that we know, with the community, we could leverage for community benefit and university benefit.

Mr ONDARCHIE — Our own Minister for Planning.

Mr ENSOR — Your Minister for Planning. That is a partnership project we could develop with our communities for community benefit.

In terms of the retention, we know that in our regional campuses 60 to 70 per cent of the students who study regionally stay there. We are as concerned about the international retention as we are about the retention of local graduates in our region. We want local graduates to study in Melbourne’s north, play in Melbourne’s north and work in Melbourne’s north in jobs that satisfy their aspirations. We do not want our local graduates to feel that they have to go off into the CBD or Sydney to pursue their aspirations. We see that again as a joint shared partnership between community and ourselves. As I mentioned earlier around developing a bioscience agribiosciences economy, more sophisticated jobs within a knowledge economy and the retention of international students as part of that is important. I do not have the statistics to hand, but they will follow opportunity, and we want those opportunities to be local; we want to grow local. It sounds fairly parochial, but it is the sum of the locals that makes the big, and we think the university has an important part to play with community in developing that.
Ms HUTCHINS — As a graduate of La Trobe Bundoora and someone who has spent an hour and a half each way getting there and back on public transport I absolutely know what you are talking about, but I have to say it was the campus experience that was the most amazing thing about La Trobe that stays with you forever, and I congratulate you on such a great campus. I am interested to know a little bit about the concept of a tertiary enabling program that you might be looking at implementing in conjunction with the global learning village here. Do you have any comments around that?

Mr ENSOR — There are three levels to that discussion. One is around articulation/relationships with local TAFE providers that have been enabled by leadership within the Global Learning Village. The second relates to how the university teaches, and up to now it has been face to face: you get on public transport — as you did, Ms Hutchins — and fight your way through the traffic, sit in a lecture theatre and be educated. We understand that caters for certain students like school leavers; it does not cater for mature age learners and it does not cater for many school leavers who now have to work increasing hours. So we have a strategic focus on flexible delivery which would enable us to use a facility like this to deliver an increased number of programs.

By flexible delivery we mean it might be online, or it might be block mode where lecturers come into a space like this for a period of time for a certain number of weeks in a year to deliver a program over time so that it is accessible, and it would increase participation. We know that we have to change the way we do what we do to cater for the substance of what you are looking at, and we are well on the road to doing that.

The CHAIR — I am just mindful of the time; we have gone substantially over time. Is it a quick question?

Ms McLEISH — I was just going to ask to what extent that compromises the campus experience, which you yourselves talked about and Natalie has talked about.

Mr ENSOR — We understand that most students are segmented differently: some students want it, some students need it. If I wanted to study now, it would be the last thing I would want. I would want to study, mix with some professional peers and get my degree and get on with my life. It is about understanding different learning needs and life needs. But we do not want to compromise on that.

Ms GRALEY — The committee has heard some evidence about health and wellbeing indicators being poor in the northern areas — and across the board in the outer suburbs, frankly — and I just wonder if the university has any relationships with health providers to try to be proactively engaged in solving some of these challenges and whether that would include La Trobe still wanting to establish a medical school.

Mr ENSOR — There is an initiative which I mentioned earlier around working with local governments to address challenges and opportunities on a regional basis as opposed to an LGA basis. Health and wellbeing is one of the areas that we have looked at, and we are proposing to host a Melbourne’s north summit during this year where we could bring together local experts around issues of Melbourne’s north but also bring in international experts who are specialists in understanding the problems and opportunities of outer metropolitan suburbia.

Within that we have one specific project called the Northern Melbourne Collaboratory, which is a partnership between ourselves and health and human services providers around sharing data and trying to derive new knowledge from that data. We are a key partner in that. In terms of a medical school, universities need to reflect constantly on what they provide. We know there are six medical schools in New South Wales and there are three in Victoria. We know one size does not fit all, that the simple model of increasing the number of places in existing medical schools is simply bedding down the status quo in terms of how things are delivered. We need innovation. We have ageing populations across rural Australia. We have rapid growth in Melbourne’s north. So we do recognise that there will need to be provision of additional medical training facilities in Melbourne’s north at some point in the near future.

The CHAIR — Thank you very for those comments. Our time together has come to an end, Mr Ensor, so I thank you and Ms Harris as well for your input. It has been illuminating and fascinating and obviously gives us an opportunity for a whole lot of cascading thoughts as well. I would like to stress the committee’s potential interest in the Melbourne’s north summit, and I ask that you advise us, through the agency of our executive officer, Nathan Bunt, when that may be taking place. The summit might well fall within the time frame prior to our reporting on our current inquiry so we would be very interested to know about the structure and timing of it.
Mr ENSOR — And if I might respond by saying regarding the extent to which you might want to be involved in its structure and form, similarly we would be happy to have that discussion.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much; we value those comments too. Thanks for your time today.

Mr ENSOR — We could sit and talk all afternoon about this.

The CHAIR — We do not dare start.

Ms HARRIS — Thank you very much.

Mr ENSOR — Thank you very much.

Witnesses withdrew.