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SENATE

RURAL AND REGIONAL AFFAIRS AND TRANSPORT
REFERENCES COMMITTEE

Reference: Rural and regional access to secondary and tertiary education opportunities

WEDNESDAY, 2 SEPTEMBER 2009

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SENATE RURAL AND REGIONAL AFFAIRS AND TRANSPORT

REFERENCES COMMITTEE

Wednesday, 2 September 2009

Members: Senator Nash (*Chair*), Senator Sterle (*Deputy Chair*), Senators Heffernan, McGauran, Milne and O'Brien

Substitute members: Senator Hanson-Young to replace Senator Milne and Senator Adams to replace Senator Heffernan.

Participating members: Senators Abetz, Adams, Back, Barnett, Bernardi, Bilyk, Birmingham, Mark Bishop, Boswell, Boyce, Brandis, Bob Brown, Carol Brown, Bushby, Cameron, Cash, Colbeck, Jacinta Collins, Coonan, Cormann, Crossin, Eggleston, Farrell, Feeney, Ferguson, Fielding, Fierravanti-Wells, Fifield, Fisher, Forshaw, Furner, Hanson-Young, Heffernan, Humphries, Hurley, Hutchins, Johnston, Joyce, Kroger, Ludlam, Lundy, Ian Macdonald, McEwen, McGauran, McLucas, Marshall, Mason, Milne, Minchin, Moore, Parry, Payne, Polley, Pratt, Ronaldson, Ryan, Scullion, Siewert, Troeth, Trood, Williams, Wortley and Xenophon

Senators in attendance: Senators Back, Nash, O'Brien and Sterle.

Terms of reference for the inquiry:

To inquire into and report on:

An assessment of the adequacy of Government measures to provide equitable access to secondary and post-secondary education opportunities to students from rural and regional communities attending metropolitan institutions, and metropolitan students attending regional universities or technical and further education (TAFE) colleges, with particular reference to:

- a. the financial impact on rural and regional students who are attending metropolitan secondary schools, universities or TAFE;
- b. the education alternatives for rural and regional students wanting to study in regional areas;
- c. the implications of current and proposed government measures on prospective students living in rural and regional areas;
- d. the short- and long-term impact of current and proposed government policies on regional university and TAFE college enrolments;
- e. the adequacy of government measures to provide for students who are required to leave home for secondary or post-secondary study;
- f. the educational needs of rural and regional students;
- g. the impact of government measures and proposals on rural and regional communities; and
- h. other related matters.

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Committee met at 12.31 pm

CHAIR (Senator Nash)—I declare open this public hearing of the Senate Standing Committee on Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport. The committee is hearing evidence on its inquiry into rural and regional access to secondary and tertiary education opportunities. I welcome you all here today. This is a public hearing and a *Hansard* transcript of proceedings is being made. Before the committee starts taking evidence I remind all witnesses that, in giving evidence to the committee, they are protected by parliamentary privilege. It is unlawful for anyone to threaten or disadvantage a witness on account of evidence given to a committee, and such action may be treated by the Senate as a contempt. It is also a contempt to give false or misleading evidence to a committee.

The committee prefers all evidence to be given in public but, under the Senate's resolutions, witnesses have the right to request to be heard in private session. It is important that witnesses give the committee notice if they intend to ask to give evidence in camera. If a witness objects to answering a question, the witness should state the ground upon which the objection is taken and the committee will determine whether it will insist on an answer, having regard to the ground which is claimed. If the committee determines to insist on an answer, the witness may request that the answer be given in camera. Such a request may of course also be made at any other time.

I would ask witnesses to remain behind for a few minutes at the conclusion of their evidence in case Hansard staff need to clarify any terms or references. I remind people in the hearing room to ensure that their mobile phones are either turned off or switched to silent. Finally, on behalf of the committee I would like to thank all those who have made submissions and sent representatives here today for their cooperation in this inquiry.

I remind senators that the Senate has resolved that an officer of a department of the Commonwealth or of a state shall not be asked to give opinion on matters of policy and shall be given reasonable opportunity to refer questions asked of the officer to superior officers or to a minister. This resolution prohibits only questions asking for opinions on matters of policy and does not preclude questions asking for explanations of policies or factual questions about when and how policies were adopted. Officers of the department are also reminded that any claim that it would be contrary to the public interest to answer a question must be made by a minister and should be accompanied by a statement setting out the basis for the claim.

[12.33 pm]

COX, Mr David Kenneth, Deputy Principal, K-12 and Distance Education, Southern Cross School, New South Wales Department of Education and Training

CHAIR—Welcome. Would you like to make an opening statement?

Mr Cox—Thank you. For the last 15 years I have been deputy principal at Southern Cross School, and I am in charge of a distance education centre. Southern Cross School is somewhat unique. It is a K-12 school. It has two support units—for students with physical disabilities and for students with intellectual disabilities—plus a distance education centre. The distance education centre provides for students who are isolated by circumstance or geography. The area that we service goes from Coffs Harbour to Tweed Heads—this is the northern most part of the area from which we draw—out to Inverell and up to Texas, on the Queensland border. Distance education attempts to support students who are isolated by circumstance as much as by geography. We use a range of technologies and the traditional methods of a correspondence school to support those students. The changing nature of the North Coast and the students that we service has seen an increasing need for regular face-to-face contact as well as contact through distance methods.

After students have been with us, we are very interested in their transition—that is, when they leave us to go to either TAFE or some form of tertiary training or employment. I was interested in one of the committee's terms of reference relating to students who are isolated in rural areas. Distance education students receive an additional six points in their UAI to assist their matriculation to university.

I am happy to answer your questions. I hope that gives you a brief idea of the sorts of things I do.

CHAIR—How many students do you service in the region?

Mr Cox—In this area there are 254 full-time students in a range of seven or eight categories and we have 511 students doing a single course from year 9 through to year 12. Those single courses are basically courses they cannot do at their home school.

CHAIR—What types of courses are those?

Mr Cox—Usually, in some of the smaller high schools, it is where the curriculum cannot provide for something such as a particular language. We offer a full range of languages, including Spanish, French, German, Italian, Chinese, Japanese—I think I missed one. We also offer subjects which may not readily be available in a smaller high school or may not have been chosen by certain students. They can be anything from music, engineering studies, physics and chemistry or any of the humanities subjects.

CHAIR—Do you offer any of the extension subjects where the extension is not offered—that is, the old three unit?

Mr Cox—Yes. The main ones are extension English and maths. We offer those too. As I said, some of the smaller high schools and some of the central schools cannot always offer them. They may have a particularly good student in one of those subjects and we will support them.

CHAIR—Would you be able to provide a breakdown of the students doing those subjects you have just outlined?

Mr Cox—What do you mean by breakdown?

CHAIR—Just on average in a given year. For example, how many students are doing physics, say, at the moment or how many students might be doing a language because they cannot access it at their school?

Mr Cox—I can give you an estimate. It usually ends up being a class for a teacher in years 11 and 12. At the moment, for example, we have 32 students doing economics—and that is through schools in the region. We would have usually between 15 and 20 students doing most of the languages. In the sciences, we will always get somewhere between 10 and 15 students doing physics, chemistry or biology. That is the single core students. We do have 56 students in years 11 and 12 and they do the full range of subjects.

Senator BACK—Do these students you speak of do all their work externally; they do not actually come into the campus?

Mr Cox—No, usually it is a combination. Students will come in to visit us at times and we will visit them in their home settings, or in what we call field schools. We may conduct a school in some area in the country, say, Tenterfield, Grafton or even Tweed Heads. We actually had a preparatory course here today for our year 10 students doing their school certificate. They will come into the campus at different times.

Another practice we have started in recent years is that we have created outreach support centres where we deploy our staff around the region or employ teachers to work with students. You need to understand the changing nature of distance education. Our students are not just students who are geographically isolated; we have a number of students who are enrolled because they suffer a particular mental illness or they may be enrolled on behavioural grounds. We try and help these young folk at these support centres because, in many cases, their home situation does not allow them to study at home.

Senator BACK—They cannot study at home?

Mr Cox—It is very difficult for some. Some of these kids cannot be at school because of their behaviours or things that have happened, or they have not been attending school. We have had students who were non-attendees or school refusers, and their home situation could have had elements of violence or abuse, particularly substance abuse. We try and facilitate their learning by having them work with some of our teachers in a setting that is a safe environment outside their home, certainly not in a school. Not far from here is the Tweed Heads police and citizens youth club. We have a teacher who works there with eight students two days a week. These kids could be referred to as street kids or homeless. They may have parents and they may have a

home of sorts, but it is not conducive to study and that is why we work with them in these centres.

CHAIR—Are those students learning that way because they have the initiative themselves to want to work when their home environment does not allow them to?

Mr Cox—Yes. Often homeschool liaison officers, like attendance officers with schools, will identify these students and seek our support. I think what has caused the changing nature of distance education in recent years has been the breakdown of the family unit. You cannot always assume that students come to school happy, having had a good night's sleep, well fed and had mum and dad both tell them they loved them before they left. A lot of our work with students is welfare oriented as much as it is about education.

Senator BACK—Could you give me some idea how this whole process is funded? Presumably it is from the New South Wales government. Along the border here, some of the students would nominally be resident in Queensland. Could you give me some idea how this program is funded?

Mr Cox—Yes. We are funded on a per capita basis the same as for other students in New South Wales state schools. We receive an additional grant from Equity Programs, which is part of the New South Wales Department of Education and Training. We usually receive around \$100,000 to \$120,000 in addition to support these students for the extraordinary things that cannot be provided through normal school funding. Interestingly, they draw the line on state boundaries. We have a lot of inquiries from Queensland to support students in subjects such as languages. We cannot enrol them if they are resident in Queensland.

Senator BACK—If they are a street kid in Tweed Heads, you could not?

Mr Cox—That is right. It is marginal, isn't it? They have to be on the right side of the Tweed River.

Senator BACK—Is there any sort of accountability in terms of the proportion of time that a kid turns up?

Mr Cox—Yes. We have to keep records of attendance. The same rules apply for these students as for any other student. We are usually talking about students trying to get their school certificate. Often you will find that they may do their year 10 over two years because their own circumstances are such that they may be trying to keep themselves fed and have a roof over their heads. They may have accumulate year 10 over two years whereas other students would do it over one year.

Senator BACK—You mentioned you have 254 full time and then you said you had 66 in each of years 11 and 12, which I gather are out of that 254—is that right?

Mr Cox—In total in years 11 and 12.

Senator BACK—When you say they are full time, do they come full time to your campus?

Mr Cox—No.

Senator BACK—Do any of them?

Mr Cox—No. Full-time means they are not attending a state school or a non-government school at all and all their education is delivered from us.

Senator BACK—A lot of those may in fact be in a stable home environment but just simply not able to get to school because of the tyranny of distance or whatever?

Mr Cox—Yes. Most of our geographically isolated students would be students you would find around the ranges up towards the tablelands. Some of the students enrolled at home could be students suffering a mental illness. We deal with a lot of students with long-term illnesses like cancer and we have young mothers.

Also, in a different sort of category, we have a number of vocationally talented students. These are students whose vocation makes it difficult for them to attend school. They may be professional sportspeople, ballet dancers, tennis players, surfers or those sorts of things.

Senator BACK—Lastly, before I turn over to my colleagues, I am quite familiar with the School of the Air in WA.

Mr Cox—Yes.

Senator BACK—It is not face-to-face learning but there is voice-to-voice contact between a teacher and a number of children concurrently. Does that form part of the learning model, or not?

Mr Cox—That is right. It is actually part of the New South Wales Distance Education Network. It is based in Broken Hill. The School of the Air has moved almost totally to satellite. And we do a lot of satellite delivery to geographically isolated students, as well. Every state has some form of distance education. Actually Western Australia is a bit of a leader in that, because of the large area that they service. A lot of delivery—it is interesting to watch—is through satellite to students who have a computer at home. They will be engaged with learning materials and their computer, and it is beamed in by satellite.

Senator BACK—If there is time later I would like to get some indication of the degree of success in the performance of the kids.

CHAIR—Would you like to ask that now?

Senator BACK—That is my question: can you give me some idea—using, if you like, the performance of standard schoolchildren as an indicator—of how well these others perform? Is it a viable alternative?

Mr Cox—I believe it is. I say that in two ways. Students who are geographically isolated, in many cases will do their entire education from preschool to year 12 this way. Usually the geographically isolated students have a very supportive home environment, and you see that most properties have a classroom set up. Parents are involved as supporting teachers.

One of the things I have found with other full-time students is that it provides them with a means to get to their School Certificate or Higher School Certificate. In many cases year 10 students—and even some of our students who are young mothers or who have a long-term illness—will accumulate their Higher School Certificate through a pathways model over three years, or even up to seven years. The number of students who will stick at it to get the certificate is quite amazing.

Our biggest failures, I always think, are when we lose students or when students do not continue their enrolment. So one of the most important parts of our work is to have somewhere for students to go to. We have a teacher employed almost full time to work on transition so that the students go to a reasonable alternative when they leave us.

I think I mentioned the point that students who are enrolled in distance education, and are not just geographically isolated, receive an additional six points towards the university admissions index to help them get into university.

Senator O'BRIEN—It sounds as though you are picking up kids—living remotely and not—who have special needs or who otherwise fall through the cracks of the education system.

Mr Cox—Very much so. Distance education is probably one of the biggest safety nets in New South Wales—and, I think you will find, it is a safety net in most states. There is a Distance Education Support Unit in Sydney but it is very difficult to get students enrolled in that. We are dealing more and more, now, with students with special needs who, for various reasons, cannot attend school. Providing for them is becoming more and more what we do.

Senator O'BRIEN—Do you know what sort of progress to tertiary education occurs for the young people who participate in your program?

Mr Cox—I would say that the majority of them would go on to tertiary study. In fact, it is probably close to 70 per cent. I include TAFE in tertiary study, not just university. They do have a lot of individual education programs worked out for them, so they get some fairly specific help from our careers advisers and our year advisers. One of the hardest things for students learning this method is that they are isolated from other students. If you have a student who is in a class at a mainstream school, they know what other students are doing and they incidentally come into contact with a lot of the information that they need, but if a student is living at, say, Glenn Elgin or somewhere way up in the ranges behind Glenn Innes, it is hard to know what other students are learning about in terms of opportunities. So we try to put a fair bit of time and effort into giving those students information.

I taught at Nyngan in central New South Wales when I was first promoted as a social science head teacher. I taught some very intelligent students there. I was very aware that they do not know how good really good is—in some of those schools who have teachers who are really enthusiastic. They still do not know how bright the really bright students are. I am not saying they do not work hard to get the best out of them, but it is hard to compare. One of the things that works in schools, if you are an intelligent student, is to have intelligent students around who push you. If there is not that competition quite honestly you do not always get the best out of students. Although, having said that, we had a student who lived in a caravan by herself, independently, about 80ks this side of Stanthorpe and she got a UAI of 97—she was bordering

on brilliant. That is an exception. I would say that a student in those circumstances would be hugely disadvantaged normally.

Senator O'BRIEN—What was the difference there? Was she just an exceptional student?

Mr Cox—It was amazing that, with little parental support—I think she had given up on her parents a few years before—she had managed to get things together. This lady has gone into law. Some students do get out from under to achieve those sorts of things.

You can measure success in different ways. I always say a greater success is when students do something positive in further education, employment or training. Two years ago we had two students here, two girls—it does not sound like a lot—who attended the PCYC program, who gained their School certificate. They then went on to further training at Kingscliff TAFE where they progressed their HSC and also did a traineeship in hospitality. Quite honestly, those two girls, if they had not had some intervention, would have been literally on the streets, probably selling themselves and a lot of other things associated with that. That is as big a success as anything—when you see a young person who otherwise would have gone to crime or some sort of self-harm who go on to further education.

Senator O'BRIEN—In terms of those who go through the program and proceed to university education—I presume there are some—how do they cope with the change from your system to university? Are they better for it or do they have limitations because of that solution factor?

Mr Cox—Interestingly, most of them become independent learners. Those who have successfully coped with distance education in the HSC tend to do very well at university because they already have initiative and self-discipline, which we know many of our colleagues did not have when they first left school because they were used to being in the supported environment where they were directed to study, where parents provided for them or the school gave them direction. We hear wonderful stories back later from the majority of these folk after tertiary study.

There was a young lass from Grafton who had battled chronic fatigue for some years. We received a picture of her—she graduated in radiology and she is now working at the Children's Hospital at Westmead. She was a student who, because of her physical condition, the nature of chronic fatigue, could not manage to stay at school. But she did the same thing—she did her HSC over four years, not two.

Senator STERLE—How do these remote students, street kids, sick students and young mothers come to the attention of the school? Do you look for them or do they know you exist?

Mr Cox—It is an interesting thing. We cannot tout for business. I cannot put ads in the paper, a listing in the yellow pages or such things.

CHAIR—Why is that?

Mr Cox—It is a system of referral through schools. Students who have been isolated long term will know about it. Also, it is quite expensive when you consider the cost of educating a student through distance education. For a student to do secondary schooling up to year 10 in a

school, it is around \$8,400; for a distance education student it is about \$17,000. So it is more expensive, and the staffing ratio is much better. High schools are staffed at a ratio of one to 14—one teacher to 14 students. In distance education centres it is about one to seven. So it is quite expensive and labour intensive.

But the students come to us through referrals. If they are students who are not attending, it may be through homeschool liaison officers or the local officers of the Department of Education and Training. In many cases, parents will seek us out but, if a student is enrolled on behavioural grounds, that would have to be a referral through the local school education director to us. Every distance education enrolment requires a reasonably high level of documentation, so you cannot just do it as a choice. Homeschooling provides for that. Sometimes people confuse the two, but the support homeschooling students get from the department of education or the board of studies is copies of the curriculum. It is then up to the parents to provide the educational instruction, whereas distance education students have a reason to be enrolled and that reason is documented and reviewed. For example, we review all of the students we have enrolled on behavioural or mental illness grounds or what is called extraordinary circumstances every six months with the local officers of the Department of Education and Training.

I did not mention extraordinary circumstances before. It can be a student enrolled for various reasons which fall outside the normal isolation categories, and a good example is a student in witness protection. We have had quite a number of those over time and, because of the circumstances of the case or their family situation, they will be enrolled and we will be directed to take them.

Senator STERLE—Would it be fair to assume that, say, a lot of the parents of street kids would not know where they are anyway?

Mr Cox—A lot of them have parents. It is an interesting thing about street kids. They will not always sleep in the same bed every night. They may sleep at a friend's place, but a fair proportion—I would say it is more than 50 per cent—would be actively supporting themselves. So there would be very little parent involvement in this.

Senator STERLE—So the answer to my last question was that a lot of it comes from parent referrals as well, but there must be a number of students who are doing this of their own volition. Somehow they have heard about what you do and come to you seeking support.

Mr Cox—Yes, and then often it means that you have to go back and build a case for them to be enrolled. I think you would be aware that they are raising the school leaving age in New South Wales, and we are actively preparing programs to support students in that 15 to 17 year age group. For a lot of these students, though, and so-called street kids—I hope I explained this before—the reason that they will do their HSC over a couple of years is that a lot of them work part time. They do that just to keep the roof over their head.

Senator STERLE—There are obviously strict criteria as to who gets in and who does not.

Mr Cox—Yes. If an enrolment is refused, we have to explain to the parent or the student why. It is a bit like transition, though. The most important thing you need to do is provide viable alternatives. Often that may be referring them to TAFE. But TAFE are actually just in the

process of changing their rules too. After this year they will no longer off a school certificate equivalent. TAFE will actually provide more for adult learners; that is, those over 17. There is a large group in that 15- to 17-year-old age group that I am conscious of for which we may have to try and provide programs.

Senator STERLE—I have a couple of further questions. I think you said you have 254 now. What is the limit that you can take?

Mr Cox—We are just about bursting at the seams at the moment. But we can increase our staffing through the year. At the moment we have just on 65 full-time staff. We started the year with 54. For those enrolments we can add teachers through the year. A lot of those teachers are casual teachers in the area who are looking for full-time work and we employ them as the need arises.

Senator STERLE—You were saying that the leaving age for students in New South Wales is going to increase. When does that come in?

Mr Cox—On 1 January.

Senator STERLE—Next year?

Mr Cox—Yes. A student who now leaves in year 10 and does go to employment or does not do anything is not obliged to return next year but any student who enrolls after 1 January next year and is not 17 will be required to stay until they complete the HSC or they turn 17.

Senator STERLE—And it can be a maximum of up to four years to complete the HSC?

Mr Cox—They can take that long. In actual fact it is seven that they can do it over.

Senator STERLE—Are there many that take it to seven?

Mr Cox—The time involved could be to do with anything from just their circumstances to a long-term illness. I saw a girl who went to five. She was a very dedicated student but she was also incredibly ill. She did complete it. I saw another girl who did the same sort of thing. She had cystic fibrosis. Sadly, she died just after she completed it. That is the thing that actually is a sad part of this job: you do have students die. Obviously, that affects the staff.

Senator BACK—You provide them with tremendous hope and resources whilst they are facing that, don't you?

Mr Cox—I think so. We certainly try to.

Senator STERLE—Of course the hoary chestnut is always finance. Do you get a lot of support from industries and businesses in the area?

Mr Cox—We do not actively seek it. Local service clubs support us a lot. It goes to this funny thing that I was explaining before, that you cannot actually tout for business. It is expensive, but we have never been knocked back when we have sought help from local business to sponsor

students and to provide work placement when students' courses require it or even scholarships or prizes at the end of the year and things like that. They have been very good.

Senator STERLE—Are there other institutions in the area that do the same as you do?

Mr Cox—No, not where we are. Across New South Wales there are a number of schools of distance education. Going south, the closest one is in Camden Haven, down near Port Macquarie, and then in Sydney. There is a very large school of distance education in Sydney.

Senator STERLE—Did I have a blank look on my face when you said that?

Mr Cox—Why is that?

Senator STERLE—Because how far is that?

CHAIR—The senator is a Western Australian.

Mr Cox—My apologies. Senator, from where we are in Ballina Camden Haven is about 400 kilometres south and then it is about another 300 kilometres to Sydney. It is about another 250 kilometres south-west to Karabar, which is near Canberra.

Senator STERLE—My last question is this. Why aren't you allowed to tout for business?

Mr Cox—That is almost like a question on notice. It is a thing that we have never been allowed to do and I will try to explain it by example. One of the primary distance education centres—there is one in Casino and one in Port Macquarie—put an advertisement in a paper saying that you could actually educate your children for free if they were travelling or isolated. The CEO actually said, 'You can't do that.' So it is a thing that you accept you cannot do. As good public servants we do as we are told.

Senator STERLE—Thank you.

CHAIR—It does seem quite extraordinary. Obviously, you are offering such a crucial service that is not being offered anywhere else. It seems quite extraordinary that you are not allowed to actually advertise.

Mr Cox—Honestly, I think it is to do with the cost factor. Also, for example, with some of the support centres that we have set up that work here and in some isolated Aboriginal communities, you have to be very careful how you manage that because people see it as 'that other school' when they say, 'We'll go to that other school.' That does create some tension with other educational agencies.

CHAIR—It is a bit like 'don't mention the war' though, isn't it? Is it that those who are really needy will find you and you are not to mention anything in case somebody else actually wants to access you?

Mr Cox—I think there is always a concern too that not all parents enrol students for the right reasons. It used to be a problem with geographically isolated students that they were enrolled so

that they could work on the farm, and that was a quite common practice in some areas. We have had issues where parents or adults—it has not always been parents—have tried to hide children through enrolling in distance education. The child protection legislation applies to us. If we are aware of any issues relating to neglect or abuse, we are mandatory notifiers. One of the other areas that I did not mention is this. We also work with the Department of Community Services as to a number of students. The Department of Community Services will often rely on us to provide an educational service to some very damaged young folk and their role then becomes one more to do with out-of-home care where they have a suitable foster placement.

CHAIR—You have obviously got strict criteria as to whom you take in. I am trying to understand how, if you cannot advertise, you provide information about what it is that you do effectively.

Mr Cox—The guidelines for enrolment—and if you are interested in them I could get a copy to you—go to all district offices of the Department of Education and Training plus to all schools and to non-government schools as well. You do get approached by a lot of people anyway. Honestly, I sometimes wonder how big it could become if you were to open it up. I know that always nagging away in the back of your mind is that cost thing that someone is going to worry about in terms of provisioning anyway.

CHAIR—How many staff do you actually have?

Mr Cox—At the moment just on 65.

Senator BACK—Full-time equivalent?

Mr Cox—Yes.

CHAIR—How many of those would have some form of welfare training?

Mr Cox—All teachers have compliance training. They regularly have to do that. Most head teachers and year advisors would have additional welfare training as well. We have a specific head teacher, welfare, whose job is to support those students who are usually enrolled on mental illness grounds or some of the medical grounds. Welfare is a big part of the job. I often say that we are not really concerned that students start work at nine o'clock and they are sitting there in their uniform but that they are in a safe environment and a supportive environment and that they are able to actually do their work.

For a lot of these students, particularly students with medical conditions, the reason that distance education works for them is that they can vary their hours. If you have ever seen a student battling something like chronic fatigue or an eating disorder—we do get a number of, particularly female, students with eating disorders—there are times when they are very high functioning and can work very hard and other times when they are just out to it. The sad ones are young folk with cancer treatment, with ongoing chemotherapy and things like that. There will be times when they just cannot do much at all, but in the times when they are well they are so keen to get on top of their illness and get back to school that they will work incredibly hard. But mainstream schooling cannot support that—when you are here working hard and you want to

work 12 hours a day but then you are going to have six weeks where you will be in the children's hospital or something like that.

CHAIR—Earlier you used the term 'school refusers', given that there is a requirement to go to school. What are the criteria to be a school refuser? How does that happen?

Mr Cox—They are interesting. Often they are enrolled on medical grounds, mental illness grounds or extraordinary circumstances grounds. There are students who are diagnosed—and they have to be diagnosed by a medical specialist; it is not just a GP's diagnosis—as actually having a psychological condition: they are school phobic, and they will not go to school. There are other students who are refusers, particularly in some isolated immunities, where it is like inertia or whatever—it is easier not to go to school and nobody forces them to. A lot of the students that we work with actually are street kids from around here who originally were seen as school refusers. They were students who just were not attending local schools. The schools see them as someone who has got a poor attendance history. Usually you will find they have also got very little support at home from their parents. That is why we try to use these support centres.

Senator BACK—I wanted to be a school phobic, but my mother wouldn't let me! What, if anything, do you want this committee to take on board as an action item to report back to the Senate? I think we have all found this to be very, very interesting and somewhat distressing, but is there anything particularly—

Mr Cox—There is one thing. In New South Wales—and I think it may be the case in other states as well—there is a real need for increased support for behavioural students and students who cannot attend school. We end up as an agency in place of schools for those sorts of students. Sadly there are an increasing number of young folk who have various behaviour disorders. The public school system certainly does try to support them, but I think that is an area where a lot can still be done. Not far from Tweed Heads is a place called Caldera, which is an SSP, or school for specific purposes. They deal largely with behavioural students. We support them. We provide some of our staffing to them so they can help us support some of our senior students. Just as an aside: for a student enrolled on behavioural grounds, once they have finished the School Certificate all support is reduced. Students who have behaviour issues do not suddenly become good because they turn 16. Often that support needs to be ongoing, even into adulthood. If you can take any suggestion to give more support to students with behavioural disorders and schools, I would really appreciate it.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for appearing here today and congratulations—you are obviously offering some incredible opportunities to these students. Very well done.

Mr Cox—Thanks very much.

[1.17 pm]

O'FLYNN, Ms Geraldine, President, tweedgoldcoastRs Association Inc.

CHAIR—Welcome. Is there anything you would like to add about the capacity in which you appear?

Ms O'Flynn—The tweedgoldcoastRs Association Inc. is the campus association for the Tweed-Gold Coast campus of Southern Cross University.

CHAIR—I want to acknowledge that I know Ms O'Flynn from another part of my life. Would you like to make an opening statement before we ask questions?

Ms O'Flynn—Okay. Thank you very much for the opportunity to be here. My voice is very croaky, so I really will not be saying very much, I am afraid. I do have a written submission to forward to you. I will just make note of the major points in that submission and then I will leave the written work with you.

When I was made aware that this hearing was going to be here, I sent out an email to staff and students at Southern Cross, particularly Gold Coast, because that is who I represent, asking for some feedback on some of the issues that they have concerning access to tertiary education opportunities. I will go through the list. To start with, there are cross-border issues relating to the recognition of degrees. For regional students choosing to study, accessing degrees that have broader recognition is difficult, particularly for us here on the Gold Coast. Our law degree has yet to be recognised by the Queensland bar, so there is an issue there. Class sizes have been a problem. Tutorials tend to be crowded. This particular comment came from somebody who is also concerned about the number of TAFE students in classes as well.

The next point is the isolation of regional students and their lack of access to campuses to be able to participate and make their higher education experience that much more worth while. One big issue for this area and a lot of other regional areas is access to public transport. You have probably had that raised already.

CHAIR—We actually just did a whole inquiry on public transport.

Senator STERLE—The Gold Coast one was interesting.

CHAIR—TOOT were witnesses.

Ms O'Flynn—It is significant for younger students not long out of school who are probably only holding down part-time jobs in low-pay, low-skill sectors and cannot afford their own cars. That is a big issue.

I will move into a couple of other areas, which are not specifically about the access but about creating the opportunities to understand and engage with universities. This is social equity. We cannot push hard enough for the role of regional universities in their attempts to establish social

equity and their position and responsibilities with regard to community engagement. Also, there is the issue of mature-age government placements. This is an interesting one. Somebody recognised that there were a lot of people in the community in regional areas who had substantial experience in their lives that was not particularly recognised. Perhaps regional universities could go some way towards recognising those achievements. They have made some suggestions as to how that could be implemented. Access to the internet is a huge one. We have a lot of black spot areas, where people are not getting mobile coverage and do not have even dial-up internet access or other internet connection at home. On our own campus, we are limited to Microsoft and Apple, and some other programs that are free are not accessible to our students. That is probably a policy of the university, but what universities provide for their students should be looked at as well.

One area of huge concern at the moment is the implementation of shortened semesters. Our university, Southern Cross, has brought in a trimester situation and there is a lot of concern that staff are overloaded and students are not getting the substantial benefits of student life. They are under a lot of pressure. Also, they are having to work to continue their studies. As I say, there is a lot of concern around the short semesters. An area that I think really impacts on regional universities is their lack of ability to provide a range of courses. I note in the submission from Southern Cross, on the back of its inquiry into the combination with Charles Sturt, they acknowledge that a lot of students leave regional areas to access courses that are not available in regional universities. But I do appreciate that there is the critical mass needed to put the units and the courses into universities.

Another area that I think could be looked at, as has been pointed out by people I received emails from, is engaging regional universities as shared hubs of community engagement. Earlier today I spoke with our equity officer, who travels to high schools in the area and engages with children in, say, years 11 and 12 who might be on the cusp of looking at going to university. But there is a psychological barrier there. They might think: 'Oh, no, it's too hard. It's not for me. How could I ever think I could go to university?' We need to identify these kids and go some way towards breaking down the barriers to kids actually engaging and going to university. I think a lot could be done with regional universities as a hub of engagement for people in the community. It could provide opportunities for social and business networking if the resources could be used. In relation to that, I would like to cite the Southern Cross University Coffs Harbour education campus, which has the secondary school, the TAFE and the university. I know that the student association there is very active and very well supported also.

A couple of areas that have been quite topical of course came up: the student services and amenities bill and the issue of compulsory fees for student services. With the advent of the VSU, student representation has declined. But, as has been noted in this email to me, there already exists a national student union, and the role of advocacy for students could actually fall to them rather than pitting students against their individual universities. Certainly, there is a need for advocacy for students but, particularly in our instance, it has fallen to volunteers to advocate for students and it becomes very difficult. It makes it a very complex situation because, rather than it being a cohesive way of working together, it becomes quite problematic. Particularly with the student services and amenities bill the role of advocacy needs to be very tightly determined.

Many of the other services that have been talked about being provided in that amenities bill would fall to the individual universities to determine what their needs are. Particularly the issue of advocacy needs to be addressed—and I can speak from experience on that.

Finally, I did some research into the Youth Allowance package. I appreciate that, when it was introduced, it was considered to be budget neutral. I will just quote here from the president of the National Union of Students:

The government has been stubborn in its commitment to a budget-neutral package. This is just not good enough. The youth allowance needs greater funding.

Similarly, I think that if it is a budget neutral package, it will be Peter robbing to pay Paul, so students lose out any which way. It is fairly well substantiated that if you release students of their financial burden they are going to do much better. Their retention rates will be much higher, they will have a better experience of higher education and the outcomes will be a lot better for everybody. I think that matter needs to be addressed in order to give students opportunities for higher education.

Senator STERLE—By the way, I am still waiting for the good news in your opening statement—

Ms O’Flynn—How do you mean?

Senator STERLE—Good news around the campuses, good news about universities and the fantastic opportunity you do give students.

CHAIR—I think we take that as read, Senator Sterle.

Senator STERLE—With respect to the lack of ability to provide a range of courses, you referred to critical mass. You also mentioned the inability to connect to the internet et cetera. Would you like to give the committee a bit more of an insight into other reasons why you think there is a lack of a range of courses? Is it just because students are not here? Is it because they all want to go to Melbourne and Sydney. Is that what it is?

Ms O’Flynn—I do appreciate that it is about critical mass. There is a two-faceted approach to this in that the universities can decide which courses they are going to provide or they can be driven by the demand for courses. I think we are dillydallying between the two, particularly in regional universities where there is an imperative to—pardon the expression—put bums on seats. I can only speak from the Southern Cross point of view and from my point of view as a member of an association, but there is a bit of dillydallying on whether the courses are actually in demand or whether the university takes a strong stand, and says, ‘Okay, this is what we represent.’ I think that is part of it. As I say, there is a bit of toing-and-froing, trying to determine what would be best probably from a business sense point of view.

Senator STERLE—One would think it would probably be in the best interests of not only the universities but the students if there could be some collective conversations where some universities might specialise in one field and allow other universities to specialise in another field. Does that not happen?

Ms O’Flynn—In the research into the amalgamation of Charles Sturt and Southern Cross that was very much what was talked about. There are particular areas—for example, Southern Cross is quite good with its research, Charles Sturt have their particular areas of expertise. Those were the sorts of things that I thought would have been very beneficial out of that amalgamation of the universities.

Senator STERLE—It did not happen?

Ms O’Flynn—They did a feasibility study and, at this point of time, it is not feasible. I have been told that for it to be feasible they are looking for a third regional university to broaden out the package of what they could provide.

CHAIR—Just to clarify, the feasibility study was about the merging of Southern Cross and Charles Sturt?

Ms O’Flynn—That is right.

CHAIR—One quick question, because it is on what Senator Sterle is discussing at the moment: the issue of providing courses. Is it a bit like the chicken and the egg situation—either you have the course that will be provided, which you have described, or how many students want to utilise it, so if it is going to be a university that decide this is the road they are going to go down, is it a sort of ‘build it and they will come’ type of approach that they have to have, if they go down that road? Or the flip side of that is: how does a university determine what is the aggregate of students they think might be interested in doing a particular stream?

Ms O’Flynn—Southern Cross is a relatively young university. From my perspective, I think it is a rather minority driven university. We have some very substantial innovative courses that we offer, particularly through our Indigenous school, Gnibi, and through our holistic medicine degree in naturopathy. We are not quite as innovative in our business side of things, but we also do teaching and some nursing. It is, as you say, a case of ‘build it and they will come’. It is not like we are an established ‘sandstone university’ that has really put itself out there as being particularly the university of expertise. It is so hard to meet all the needs in a regional area. A lot of what we do is about flexible delivery. It is about providing online courses, utilising technology. I think our university goes a long way in trying to develop those things, but you cannot be all things to all students. It is very difficult. My concern is that we may have regional universities going down that path and they may also start to diminish their ability to provide quality education if they try to spread themselves too thinly. It is a very difficult situation.

Senator STERLE—It is not the best of business plans, is it? How many students are enrolled at Southern Cross?

Ms O’Flynn—I am sorry, I do not have access to that information.

Senator STERLE—By all means, take it on notice. I note in your opening statement you said that there is no harmonisation—that is not the word you used—or recognition of courses. You talked about your law degree down here. Is it right that the Bar Association in Queensland will not accept your course?

Ms O'Flynn—That is my understanding.

Senator STERLE—Could you just help me out here. I am someone who did not go to university, not because I couldn't, but because I wanted to be a truckie; that was more attractive to me. Someone can come down to the university here on the Gold Coast at Southern Cross, do a four- or five-year law degree and then cannot practise in Brisbane or in the whole of Queensland?

Ms O'Flynn—That is right. Currently, the law degree is from our Lismore campus, so it is a New South Wales law degree. We are just about to open a new campus here on the Gold Coast, which puts us into Queensland. I gather from the students' concerns that they are actually studying in Queensland and they want to know why there is not a reciprocal recognition of the New South Wales law degree in Queensland.

Senator STERLE—I just find that amazing. Are they saying that the Queensland Bar Association is saying that the students are not qualified enough and are dumbed down or something. Is that it?

Ms O'Flynn—From my understanding, if you buy a house in Queensland, you need to use a Queensland solicitor to do the conveyancing. If you buy one in New South Wales, you need to use a New South Wales solicitor for the conveyancing. The two states have different laws. I think that is what that student is alluding to, that perhaps there may be the opportunity to offer three or four units to the course that would allow the students to be recognised in the Queensland bar rather than just New South Wales.

Senator STERLE—Is it just conveyancing?

Ms O'Flynn—No, this student is talking about law in general.

Senator STERLE—It is really all around the state legislation?

Ms O'Flynn—That is my understanding from the students. It is a cross-border issue. If he wants to come and study on the Gold Coast, I presume he wants to work in Queensland but he wants to use his law degree in Queensland.

Senator STERLE—By opening up a university on the Queensland side of the Tweed River, the course will have completely different units—is that right?

Ms O'Flynn—Main campus is still Lismore; it is still a New South Wales university.

Senator STERLE—Clear as mud!

Ms O'Flynn—As opposed to doing a law degree at Griffith, which is a Queensland university. This is another contentious issue about whether universities are federally run or state run, federally funded but state run. It is quite complex. The amalgamation of Southern Cross and Charles Sturt was about making it a federal university, which would only be our second one in Australia. I am hoping that that still has legs. It may be looked into if there is a third regional

university that comes in on that, in which case there would be a whole other basket of problems to be dealt with. In this particular instance, this student is having a cross-border issue.

Senator STERLE—You talked about a number of things like the student services amenities bill, the youth allowance package and the abolition of the VSU. It happened years back, and it is not a cheap political stunt, Chair—

CHAIR—We do not do that on this committee.

Senator STERLE—No, not on this committee. Blow-ins do that, but we do not—I mean blow-ins from our side. With the abolition of the VSU—

Ms O’Flynn—I am sorry, it is the introduction of VSU.

Senator STERLE—Yes. Has that seriously affected rural and regional students?

Ms O’Flynn—They have not been beating down the door to pay their fees voluntarily, but there have been some concerns and this is why I refer to advocacy. Students have had substantial concerns over the fact that there are no longer compulsory unions. They feel disenfranchised because there is no form of advocacy for them.

Senator STERLE—That would be students across a broad?

Ms O’Flynn—Yes. How does it impact on regional students?

Senator STERLE—Yes.

Ms O’Flynn—I do not think you could really draw a difference between regional and metropolitan students in that respect; it is still a representative body. Regional students need to access services as do metropolitan students, but a lot of issues are broader regional issues anyway—transport, health facilities, dental and things like that.

CHAIR—How has voluntary student unionism impacted on your university’s ability to deliver services?

Ms O’Flynn—I will read this for you which is about Southern Cross University:

Southern Cross University has, since the advent of VSU, provided funding for four campus associations, Crux Postgraduate Association, Coffs Harbour Student Association, TweedgoldcoastRs Association, and Lexus, the Lismore and external student association, each of which function according to their own relevant Service Level Agreement. In addition SCU in conjunction with their Student Services provide for an Office of Sport and Cultural Activities. One of the main concerns raised in relation to the running of the student associations has been the level of student advocacy expected from each, and the lack of clear guidelines for the implementation of advocacy needs.

Southern Cross University have provided quite substantial funding to those four associations as well as OSCA.

We also have a very substantial student services system which provides a doctor on the campus in Lismore. It is difficult here at Tweed because we have not opened our new campus yet. We will have to wait and see what facilities unfold over there. It is always a matter of having to go virtually cap in hand each year to the university to substantiate the funding for our needs. But I have been in consultation with other university associations, and they go from ANU, who have more money than they know what to do with in their student associations, down to other universities that virtually say, 'Students? What students?' and are not finding their student associations at all. I feel quite grateful to Southern Cross University that they have actually given us this opportunity.

But, having said that, I cannot actually substantiate where the funding is coming from or how long it will last. That is why addressing the student amenities bill is really important. I am in two minds about the compulsory fee but I think there must be a way around it that still provides services to students. As I say, I have suggested calling on the national student union to take on the role of advocacy so that students are not pitted against their individual universities, because that is a very complex thing to do. That is for universities themselves but is also part and parcel of engaging with the community in order to make the provision of services part of what the community does in relation to its connection with the university as well. I very strongly try to build community relations with our university. We currently have various businesses that support us for our social functions, providing prizes for events and things that we have. That is some way that regional universities could go.

This is a bit of a long bow, but in this country in the last couple of hundred years there were some very strong church and religious organisations that were the heart of regional communities, and I personally think that a lot of those institutions have gone by the wayside. But I see the university as a potential place of community engagement. Regional universities could go some way to providing that sort of hub not just for people who go to university but for everything from appreciation of the arts to delivering information to business networks and engaging high school students to break down those psychological barriers that make them say, 'I could never go to university.' I think there is a much bigger role for regional universities to play in engaging with communities. There could perhaps be some substantial reciprocal arrangements in providing student services. perhaps professionals could come in and provide pro bono work in various areas of need in student services and that sort of thing.

Senator BACK—I have found the discussion most interesting, particularly in relation to the relative inability of some regional universities to be able to offer a range of courses. I would be interested in your comments on whether or not we are actually using the best resources in our Australian universities. By that I mean: are we really using the technologies that are available now to get information to students and to have decent interaction between students and faculty? Is it necessary for several universities to develop exactly the same courses—teacher training, nursing training or whatever it happens to be? Is it not possible, taking up your point of hubs, that we could have one university somewhere develop a course with excellence and have other campuses deliver that course with their local faculty members and in return other universities could reciprocate? I just get terribly frustrated as one who was teaching in the university system to see that everyone is trying to duplicate what everyone else is doing and leaving gaps that do not need to be left. Students can communicate with somebody from Tweed Heads as well as they can communicate with someone at Armidale at the University of New England or for that matter

at Adelaide university. Do you think we are yet actually taking a national approach in providing the best to students?

Ms O'Flynn—Not until we have internet speeds that are equal to those of other developed countries. How slow our services run puts us to shame. At Southern Cross University we do provide flexible delivery. We have various systems. One is called Illuminate, which takes our units across the internet and students can participate real time or access that at a later date. It is not much good if they are on a dial-up connection in their own home. I envisage there would be situations where the facilities would be there at a hub, such as the one at Coffs Harbour. A student studying palaeontology, which is completely unheard of at any regional university in their area, may be able to access it through a hub if they cannot get the internet speed at their own home. They could engage on a campus situation.

I think that also goes some way to enhancing the distance education experience. Distance education is very lonely. They may be able to access a hub where they can engage with not necessarily students doing the same coursework but like-minded people or people keen to have a discussion and share ideas. Staff could also be on hand. They may not be specialists in the field, but they could provide learning assistance for students.

Senator BACK—Do you think there is a role for the Commonwealth to move some of these universities in the direction of joining forces in a sense. For example, in Western Australia we have four universities that can actually see each other. Not only are they different but if a student tops first-year law at Murdoch and decides to transfer to UWA they have to start first-year law again. My view has always been that, since it is the taxpayer that actually funds universities, I do not think they have got that luxury. Can you comment on that? Do you think there is a role for the Commonwealth to actually give a bit of a strong prompt for some of these vice-chancellors to communicate more actively in terms of working closer?

Ms O'Flynn—I think what you are talking about there is advanced standing for units already completed.

Senator BACK—I am more talking about universities actually rationalising. Where you have three vice-chancellors and three systems, why can't you run them under the auspices of the one organisation with modern management and leadership technologies?

Ms O'Flynn—Personally I find that very limiting to the scope of endeavour that universities undertake. To combine three universities purely because they are closely located physically and to limit the scope of what they provide—

Senator BACK—Why would it limit their scope? My objective would be exactly the opposite—to open up their scope as per the case I just alluded to of a student who wanted to shift for whatever reason but could not because of what I would say were unusual restrictions.

Ms O'Flynn—A particular school or department will embrace a particular theoretical line. A school of business and law will develop a particular theoretical approach, which is adhered to. If universities are combined then it will limit the potential for those other two schools of business and law to develop a different theory and a different approach to innovation and the expansion of ideas.

Senator BACK—Yes.

Ms O’Flynn—Having said that, I think it is difficult for regional universities, as we have already discussed, to be all things to all people. I think there is a place for a substantial national regional university. I am not saying that all regional universities would come under that banner, but I think a substantial national university for regional areas would go a long way to addressing more efficiencies in the system.

Senator BACK—In Western Australia we are facing the closure of the agriculture and agribusiness university at Muresk, which is more than 100 kilometres east of Perth. I am participating in the process that is looking at that closely. It is unfortunately, after 80 years, looking like it is not going to be able to be maintained. One of the arguments is that the students want to be in the city. Is that the case here also?

Ms O’Flynn—I sometimes swim against the tide. Similarly, my background is in horticulture. I also work in the school of commerce and management. I constantly am told that there is no demand for the areas that I am interested in. I do not know that the students particularly want to go to the city. We are in a lot of trouble if they do because we do not want to lose students in regional areas. Statistics have shown that, once a student leaves a regional area, they are very reluctant to go back.

I would be more inclined to think that regional universities could better serve the city students who would like to move out to the country. I do not know what courses you could offer to get them out there, but certainly there are any number of young people who are interested in environmental issues. I think dealing with the sustainable environmental issues will be a huge focus in the future. I think regional universities will probably engage heavily in that if they are driven by the demand of students.

Senator BACK—Are you also seeing a change in the nature of students? Years ago it was traditionally kids who had come straight from school and were studying full time. Not many in fact were mature students studying part-time because they had full-time or part-time jobs. Are you seeing more of that trend also?

Ms O’Flynn—Southern Cross University has a fairly substantial number of mature age students. I think we need to bear in mind the locality we are in. Yes, the university attracts mature age students. I deal with a lot of international students here on the Tweed-Gold Coast. They are particularly drawn here by our degree in tourism and our business degree. We run a DBA as well. We get a lot of international students doing the DBA and the masters programs as well. From what I see on campus that is the make-up, but it is particular to this area. I would not say that that is regional universities in general.

Senator O’BRIEN—I am interested in the organisation you are representing—tweedgoldcoastRs. I gather it is not solely a student organisation.

Ms O’Flynn—No. Each of the associations has a service level agreement, which was natted out by the various people who are responsible for the uptake of these associations when VSU was introduced. The tweedgoldcoastRs Association was started with the imperative that we raise funding via membership and the membership was opened up to staff and students. The university

has also provided additional funding for us to engage with our students and staff on a social level. In conjunction with the Office of Sport and Cultural Activities we put sporting events on—games of soccer, table tennis and what have you.

Senator O'BRIEN—Is it the case with the other organisations you mentioned in your submission that they are a mix of staff and students?

Ms O'Flynn—Coffs Harbour is an incorporated association, but apart from having a committee they have two paid staff members who are directors of the association and they successfully run that as a business. They have revenue streams related to a uni bar that provides alcohol, they also provide printing services and other facilities for students. They have student members and they also have associate members. The membership is collected from around that whole campus hub which includes the TAFE as well. Crux is the postgraduate student association. On enrolment as a postgraduate you have membership to that association and Crux provides a newsletter, a magazine and a conference out of the funding that the university provides them with. The new undergraduate and external student association has only just been formed, so they get to show us what they are going to put on the table. As I said, tweedgoldcoastRs is open to staff and students.

Senator O'BRIEN—What is its precise role?

Ms O'Flynn—To facilitate sporting and cultural activities, to provide an avenue of communication between students and the university and to help students should they need assistance. We have recently reserved the expectation on us to provide advocacy but we will provide support to students should they need to find a particular avenue of advocacy.

Senator O'BRIEN—Your submission touched on an issue that has drawn a lot of submissions to this committee which is the youth allowance issue. You refer to the National Union of Students position which is essentially that they want more money coming into this area, not a reallocation of the existing of bucket of funds. I have two questions: firstly, in the absence of more money, is it appropriate for the government to prioritise on the basis of need and if so what principles should apply.

Ms O'Flynn—There have been any number of models on how to assess need from incomes to postcodes and the like. That is a very big question. I would have to say I am probably taking my university hat off here and putting my mother's hat on because I have a daughter who will be going to university in the next few years. I am staring down the barrel of what is going to be available for us and whether she chooses to stay locally or go elsewhere.

Senator O'BRIEN—You are probably a good witness to ask some questions of, given you have revealed a personal interest of that nature.

Ms O'Flynn—With the part of this new package about the work requirements and the extended period of 18 months before going to university, I am very worried that it will deter my daughter from maintaining her impetus to continue on at university. I think that is a difficult thing to impose upon a future student. I will say here and now that I do not think that tertiary education is a right, I think that it is something that you earn. Primary and secondary education are most definitely a right but tertiary education is something that is earned. Having said that, I

do still appreciate that the ability for a government to provide funding for students to perhaps make that journey through higher education a little bit easier is what we do as a responsible society. How we would determine need is difficult. I would like to see students stay in their regional areas, access their regional universities and keep building on that rather than leave their regional areas and head into city-centric universities which, I believe, do not necessarily answer a lot of the questions that need to be answered for the development of knowledge.

Senator O'BRIEN—I had an interesting interchange with some young people at Launceston College. Launceston is where my office is in northern Tasmania. The college is for years 11 and 12, in New South Wales education terms. We had a discussion about issues such as the provision of assistance to students who live at home, as against the provision of assistance to students who need to move away from home (a) to go to any university or (b) to go to a university of their choice, because the course that they want to attend is not available in their home city. Should the government give more priority to providing assistance to students who need to move away from home than to those who are able to remain dependent at home?

Ms O'Flynn—Course availability has a big part to play in that. In my undergraduate years I tried every form of higher education delivery, from on campus to distance education of various forms. My university did not provide the units that I wanted to do, so I undertook distance education. It was very difficult and very hard to stay motivated, but it meant that I could stay where my work was, where my family was and that sort of thing. If a student is set on a particular course and those units are not available and that student cannot stay within their home location, it would be feasible to provide relocation assistance for that student.

Senator O'BRIEN—Subject to the current determinant of need, which is the parental income test—either the existing one or the one that is proposed—that is what occurs, as I understand it. If a student has to travel more than an hour and a half from their home to study, they are able to access the away from home rate. If you were an hour and a half out of Melbourne or Brisbane, for example, you could get it. A lot of the kids at Launceston College do need to go somewhere else. All of the courses are not available in Launceston, so, whether they have to go to Hobart or Melbourne, a lot of the kids I spoke to were going to be travelling. They said that there should be a much higher priority given to providing assistance to students who must travel away from their home and therefore need to live away from home. Is that a priority that you think this committee ought to be emphasising?

Ms O'Flynn—I have already spoken about the flexible delivery options, but we are aware that the technology for them is not available. Until such a time as it is, students are going to be required to move away from home. In that particular instance I think those students should be financially supported.

Senator O'BRIEN—That is partially an answer. The question is: if you have a limited amount of money and you have to make decisions about who to support, do you prioritise those students ahead of those who can remain supported at home the way they were during their high school years, for example?

Ms O'Flynn—They are regional students living at home and they are supported by staying at home. Similarly you have citycentric students who can stay at home. That breaks it down into three groups.

Senator O'BRIEN—Not necessarily.

Ms O'Flynn—It is the students who can stay at home.

Senator O'BRIEN—There are students in capital cities who may want to do a course that is available in another capital city because it is not available in their capital.

Ms O'Flynn—Or they may choose to go from a city to a regional university.

Senator O'BRIEN—For example, in Hobart you cannot do vet science. I do not think you can do physiotherapy courses. You would need to travel to Melbourne. So it would not just be regional students who would be required to travel to do the course they wanted. People would have to leave a capital city to go to another capital city. They would be some of the students—not necessarily just regional students—who would need to travel to another location and live away from home to study.

CHAIR—That is also the case for city students who want to go out to regional universities.

Senator O'BRIEN—Exactly. Young people in Hobart who want to do nursing need to travel to Launceston, because it is at the Launceston campus. It is the same sort of category. The principle that I am seeking to engage you on is: should government prioritise those who need to live away from home over those who can remain at home to continue their higher education?

Ms O'Flynn—That is the point that I think I am making. It is a matter of robbing Peter to pay Paul in that situation. Because it is a budget neutral package, that is what is going to happen. It will have to be prioritised according to the May budget.

Senator O'BRIEN—The current system does that anyway. It has just changed the weighting. In the current system there are differential parental income tests for those who are dependent or independent but living at home and those who are independent living away from home. So the change in the system is not changing the principle; it is just changing the weightings. Am I understanding you correctly? You are saying that if that is the way it has to be, there is more of an obligation to assist the students who need to live away from home to study. Is that what you are saying?

CHAIR—If there is not an unlimited bucket of money and there are only X number of dollars to go around, is it appropriate for the government to say, 'There are only X number of dollars. These students can live at home. These cannot. We probably need to help these first.'

Ms O'Flynn—Yes. I think it would be fair to say that the student who is required to move away from their home should be assisted first. I would have to qualify that by saying that choice is an interesting thing. Suppose the student could access those course units or that degree within their home and without moving. You could perhaps create a certain degree of elitism if they choose to not stay with the university in their area that is not as highly recognised.

Senator O'BRIEN—True.

Ms O'Flynn—So then you are supporting them in their pursuit of higher education, but that can become quite a complex situation.

Senator O'BRIEN—That would introduce a principle that does not apply under the existing rules and is not proposed to apply under the rules proposed by the current government—given that the existing rules transition from the previous government. I make that point first. So you would suggest that, where the student is attending a course that is locally available and that would allow them to remain at home, they should not be eligible for youth allowance?

Ms O'Flynn—It is a very difficult one. I studied an undergraduate degree and the units that were on offer from my university did not suit my requirements. Hence, I undertook distance education. That is just an example of the university not providing what is required. There could be a situation where a student chose to do law from a sandstone university rather than Southern Cross University. That is a difficult call because the student could stay in their location but only come out with a degree from Southern Cross. I have seen this in the workforce as well. When you try to move potential employment seekers out of an area such as this one, do you pay their relocation costs to go into a job elsewhere? It is a very complex issue.

I think that there should be initial support for students who are leaving their area of location because the courses are not available. But perhaps there could be a second tier to it: if they could access units in their area but they choose to leave to pursue their studies at a university other than what is provided in their area, they could still get funding but maybe not quite as much.

CHAIR—I would like to ask a question because this is an interesting issue: need versus choice. Perhaps the committee will explore the complexity of this further with other witnesses but I am interested in your view on this. While there might be a particular course that is available locally the student might choose to travel away because there are better part-time jobs opportunities elsewhere to help them to support themselves while they are doing a course. So it not might be as simple as saying, 'Well, you can access that course here so you should do it here.' There might be other circumstances.

Senator STERLE—And housing—accommodation—and all sorts of things.

CHAIR—There could be all sorts of reasons. Do you think that while we look at it as a principle we need to explore the other issues that might surround that?

Ms O'Flynn—One of the things that I always like to bear in mind with this sort of question is that it is not a life sentence. A degree takes three to four years. A degree is something that you earn. I think that there are limitations to what can be expected to be provided and what can be expected for the duration of the student's life in that environment. I think we have to be a bit realistic about that. That is a bit blunt but it is realistic.

Senator O'BRIEN—I do not know whether there has been any sort of debate on the campus about the youth allowance issue. What sort of input have you received about it in making your submission to us?

Ms O'Flynn—I would have to say that there was none, apart from one comment which came in very late yesterday afternoon. It certainly has not been an issue that has been raised on the

Tweed Gold Coast campus. It may have been raised in Lismore. The new undergraduate association would probably give you a lot more feedback than I am able to.

CHAIR—Just on that, I know that the Coffs Harbour campus was very active in bringing this to the attention of some of the parliamentarians. Do you think that the lack of interest might be because the current students are not affected? The students who are already in the system will be, as I understand it, grandfathered, anyway. It affects the students who are going into university rather than the ones currently on campus who seem to be the most—

Ms O’Flynn—I would hazard a guess that it is probably far more topical in senior high school than it is on the campus. What is probably of more interest to us is the student services amenities bill, and whether there are going to be any fees imposed and how it is to be handed out.

CHAIR—If there are no further questions from colleagues I would like to ask you one question. I am very happy for you to take this on notice. Given, as Senator O’Brien has pointed out, the excellent nature of the two hats you are wearing as a mother and an academic—

Senator O’BRIEN—I did not point that out at all! The witness did.

CHAIR—You just acknowledged it. Sorry! The good Senator O’Brien acknowledged that to be the circumstance. Recently, the Victorian government education committee did an enquiry broadly into education, and one of their recommendations was that independent youth allowance should be available to all students who were required to live away from home, regardless. We do not necessarily need an answer now, but if you would be happy to take that on notice, give it some thought, and come back to the committee with your view on whether or not that may be appropriate and the reasons, that would be really useful.

Ms O’Flynn—Yes.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for appearing today.

Ms O’Flynn—Thank you for the opportunity.

[2.15 pm]

PEGG, Professor John Edward, Director, National Centre of Science, Information and Communication Technology, and Mathematics Education for Rural and Regional Australia

CHAIR—Welcome. You have provided the committee with submission No. 562. Do you want to make any amendments or alterations to your submission?

Prof. Pegg—No.

CHAIR—Would you like to make an opening statement before we move to questions?

Prof. Pegg—Yes. I thought it might be valuable to give you some information that you are maybe aware of but have not seen it in this form before. These are slides on some of the work that I have been doing on secondary students in rural education.

If we look at the second page, which is page 1, are you aware of PISA and TIMSS, the two international studies in maths, science and reading that were carried out throughout the world? If you look at the bottom of page 1—

Senator BACK—Does it have a table headed ‘Student performance’—

Prof. Pegg—Yes, 2000.

Senator BACK—Yes, 2000 and 2003 respectively.

Prof. Pegg—Yes. There are two really significant international studies: one is called PISA, which stands for the Program of International Student Assessment. It is run every three years. Australia has students who are randomly selected around the country who sit for that.

Senator BACK—Are these university students?

Prof. Pegg—No, they are 15-year-old students. Another program that is run internationally is called TIMSS, which stands for Trends in Maths and Science Study. That is run in a number of countries. Australia used to be involved in that program, but it has started to pull back, and PISA has taken on increasing significance. This study is done by the OECD. If you look at the 2000 data, you can see that there are a number of countries and some of them are not OECD countries. You can also see that Australia has come about fourth or fifth in terms of other countries, which is really good. I got onto the database and I did an analysis of this data in terms of rural and regional students. You will see in the black area the work that I have done. In relation to that blue Australia number, I pulled out the number of children who were living in capital cities. Do you see the black at the side?

CHAIR—Yes.

Prof. Pegg—I pulled out the numbers for those students who live in capitals elsewhere, in large provincial towns, in small towns and in villages. I have used European names. They classify villages as having about 1,000 or fewer people and small towns as having about 2,000 or 3,000 or fewer people. You can see that Australia is performing quite well. When you look at that data, you see that, the further you get away from the capital cities, the student learning outcomes for 15-year-olds declines. If you go to the next page—

Senator BACK—Professor Pegg, before you do that, so that I am clear: you have 538 capital centres. Does that mean that the students from the capital centres—

Prof. Pegg—Cities: Sydney, Brisbane—

Senator BACK—would be equivalent to the United Kingdom?

Prof. Pegg—No, equivalent to Japan.

Senator O'BRIEN—That is in numbers but you mean in terms of the size of a city, do you, Senator Back?

Prof. Pegg—No, for a capital city, it is a million or more people. That would pick up Adelaide, Melbourne—

Senator BACK—On my table 538—

Prof. Pegg—Sorry, I am referring to the first page.

Senator BACK—Thank you. The ones for the village are way down with Denmark.

Prof. Pegg—Yes, Denmark and Sweden—513. That was in 2000. If you turn over the page, you will see the science test, which is a different test, and that the same countries are involved. Again, you see Australia has performed pretty well—sixth or seventh out of all these other countries. But when you disaggregate that data in terms of where those students live, you again get this rural disadvantage.

Senator BACK—I am sorry to keep interrupting, but it is very important. You just made the comment that it is where people live. The question I want to ask you is: country kids who go to boarding schools—

Prof. Pegg—Would not be picked up in this.

Senator BACK—They would be picked up as city kids, wouldn't they, because they are at a city boarding school? It is a very interesting issue.

Prof. Pegg—It is a good point.

Senator BACK—A young child from the country at a boarding school in the city—

Prof. Pegg—Would be counted as part of the city. If you look at science in 2000 you get the same sort of data. We now jump to 2003—the third table—and it looks like Australia has done worse there than we did in 2000. Actually you will notice a lot more countries have started to come on board and when you look at the gaps between the countries we have basically held our spot in 2003. But, again, once you disaggregate that data in terms of rurality you see this large spread. If you go over the page you will see the science one for 2003, and again you see that. Every time we look at data and look through a rural-regional filter we get this disadvantage for kids, in terms of learning outcomes, living in rural areas.

As for the last one I have got, 2006, you can see now that more and more countries are coming from everywhere to be involved in the PISA. We have dropped slightly there. As a country our results have fallen back a little, but again you have got this large disparity. If you go over to the last page, you will see the science one for 2006.

If I just go now to some Australian data—the U3 numeracy benchmarks—the PISA one was the results on a test. The U3 ones are to do with benchmarks. The states and the federal government have established benchmarks at years 3, 5 and 7 and they want percentages of children to be above those benchmarks. When you look at the breakdown—metropolitan, provincial, remote, very remote—from 2003 to 2007 you notice a couple of things. As you move further and further away from metropolitan areas in Australia the numbers of kids reaching benchmarks decreases—and I must say that the benchmarks are pretty piddly, to be polite about it. If you take the worst-case scenario—very remote schools—that means that about 30 per cent of children are not hitting these very minimal benchmarks in year 3.

Senator STERLE—The very remote would be a majority of our Indigenous towns and—

Prof. Pegg—There would be a lot of Indigenous students. I did not include this chart—I can send it to you, if you like. I spoke to the federal department at the end of 2005 and said, ‘Is this very remote problem an Indigenous problem or a rural problem?’ They said that no-one had asked them that question before. But from 2006—and I took the slide out because I thought you would be overwhelmed with data—they disaggregated rural-regional into Indigenous and non-Indigenous. If you want, I can send that to you. They have split the data—

Senator BACK—Have you split the data?

Prof. Pegg—No, this is federal data. I have got the slide, but instead of ‘Metropolitan’ it has got ‘Metropolitan’ and ‘everybody’ and ‘Indigenous’.

Senator BACK—If you look at the 2003 results compared to 2007, there has been a significant fall in the very remote.

Prof. Pegg—The only one I can remember off the top of my head is the year 7, but wait until we get to year 7 and I will mention it then.

Senator BACK—School of the Air kids in the years 3, 5 and 7—are they in there at all or are they in the remote or very remote?

Prof. Pegg—I really do not know.

Senator BACK—Okay. I am just trying to get a handle on it—

Prof. Pegg—I know, and it is a good question. I have not thought to ask that question. We do work with Katherine School of the Air and Alice Springs School of the Air on another project—

CHAIR—Perhaps if you do get to the point where you ask that question, you might like to provide that to the committee. That would be appreciated.

Prof. Pegg—I will do it when I go back.

CHAIR—That would be great.

Prof. Pegg—If we go over the page, on the next page you will see ‘Year 5’.

CHAIR—It’s terrible!

Prof. Pegg—Again you will see this decline, but you will see that the numbers have declined a little bit because they had raised the benchmark. It goes up a little each year and every two years they are expecting slightly more. Then you go to year 7 and again you will see the benchmarks—and I have to stress that these benchmarks are quite low, I believe. But the issue is that whenever you look at the data and you look at it through a rural-regional filter then you get the problem of kids outside Perth, Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane, Hobart, wherever you go, being disadvantaged educationally.

CHAIR—Is the metropolitan SES bracket broken down at all?

Prof. Pegg—No. I do not know whether you know Sydney, but Sydney even includes Western Sydney, which is notorious. Inner Sydney is dominating the poor performance in some schools in Western Sydney.

CHAIR—Indeed if you extrapolated that out, some of the schools could be far, far worse than—

Prof. Pegg—That is an issue for governments too in that you do not disaggregate the data in terms of inner Sydney or Melbourne—and I know more about Sydney than I know about Melbourne—and outer Sydney or Melbourne. This tells me a couple of things which are very significant. It is not really the focus of today but I would just like to highlight where I am coming from in terms of rural and regional education. What we have been doing for the last 19 or 20 years is not really making a change in terms of mathematics. And this data is similar for literacy, by the way, and I have not included that. We need a somewhat different approach to address some of these problems.

The other thing that is a worry to me is that, if you are a parent and your child is in the bottom 30 per cent of the achievement spectrum, then in year 3 they are below benchmark but some of those will be at benchmark and some of them will be above benchmark. When you go to year 5 those below benchmark are still there. Those that are on benchmark in year 3 are now below in year 5, and you have got those still above. Then you get to year 7 and the whole lot are below benchmark. I was lucky that my children were not in that situation, but if I were a parent and had

my child in that bottom 30 per cent of the achievement spectrum, I would be really beside myself because what we are doing currently is working for average and high-achieving kids but is not working for low-achieving kids.

CHAIR—For those children who fall into that bucket, if you like, of that bottom 30 per cent—and it is great that all of these statistics are here—what happens then? What happens with this data to try to improve the situation?

Prof. Pegg—This is what I hope you are about. This data—and now it has been upgraded—has been available for quite a while and this was the catalyst for the SiMERR national centre to be established. If you go to the next page you will see that we are a national organisation. We have hubs at a university in every state and territory. The national centre is at the University of New England but you can see that every state and territory has one. In South Australia two universities, rather than competing against one another, came together as a group and are working together.

If you look at our vision, we want parents to be able to send their children to rural schools and not feel that they are giving them second best. We want kids to go to rural schools and get the same sorts of marks that they would get if they lived in Sydney, and we want teachers to be in rural areas and not feel professionally isolated.

CHAIR—What consideration has been given to extraneous things like students in regional areas who have to travel long distances, which might impact on their learning, or the lower SES that might impact on their learning, not just the school itself?

Prof. Pegg—We were given quite a lot of federal money and we did a national survey, the largest national survey ever of rural and regional Australia. There were three volumes.

CHAIR—We have copies with the secretariat, thank you.

Prof. Pegg—I know you get flooded with stuff to read, but I implore you, for rural people, to read the executive summary. It is only about eight or nine pages. We came up with 23 recommendations in that, coming out of this research. It has been said that it was the highest quality and deepest research ever undertaken into what was going on in rural and regional Australia. We looked at why teachers went to rural Australia, what kept them there and what made them leave. We looked at a whole lot of different issues. As a result of that, we came up with 23 recommendations, as I said. I have not gone into details, but in my submission I have made a proposal that would address every one of the 23 recommendations. I have funded it, and it is of the order of about \$15 million a year, although that money would be spread around the country for the different hubs. We can talk about that a bit later, if you like.

This survey pointed out a whole lot of things. Some of them were quite surprising to me. We found, for example, that the incentives that got teachers into rural areas were not the same ones that keep them there. What got teachers to go to rural areas was money, lower class sizes and promotion opportunities, but what kept them there was their love of the community, their involvement in the community and their sense of place in the community. So what needs to happen is that there need to be two sets of policies. I am jumping a bit here, but one of the recommendations is that education alone cannot solve the education problems in the rural

Australia. There needs to be support from the government in terms of transport, health and a broader group of things coming together and working collaboratively to address the problem. The theme, which I will get to in a moment, is collaboration.

The other thing we found out—and I found this one of the most sobering things, which I tend not to share very often—was to do with the reasons why people leave rural areas. One is that their spouse has got employment somewhere else. That is acceptable. That happens everywhere. But the next reason, which was very, very close—almost identical—statistically was that teachers left rural areas because of their concerns about their own children's education. I do not know how that strikes you, but here are people who have gone out to live in rural areas and yet they are leaving because of their concern. They are actually fighting the good fight out there and doing the right thing and yet they are leaving because they of their concerns about their own children. Out of all the hundreds of pages of results, I found that particular research very, very telling about the issues in rural education. Anyway, that is the background. I do not know whether you want to ask any questions. I want to go into more detail.

Senator O'BRIEN—Thank you. I think it is almost self-evident that it is not just a teaching problem in regional Australia that leads to inferior outcomes. What weighting would you give the valuing of education by the community, and the parents in the community, in the scheme of things? If it is significant, are there recommendations that would assist us to deal with the valuing of education by parents who perhaps have not performed well in the education system?

Prof. Pegg—For a lot of these things simple answers are not possible—you would know that. Some communities do not value education, and that translates through to their children. What I am suggesting is that the way forward for us is a collaborative approach between communities, because if teachers are going to stay it has to be because they are valued. There has to be a catalyst for people. The other current problem in rural education—and you would all be aware of this—is that children who do go ahead and go to universities often do not go back to the rural communities, so they actually lose those children. I have not heard it said in Australia, but when I was over in America last year talking about issues in rural education people spoke very strongly about some towns where the parents were really against education because they did not want to lose their children. I must say that I have not had evidence of that here, but I assume it is there.

There are a lot of impacts. When banks and other important industries left rural areas they often took families with degrees, and so often the top was cut off some of the schools. When we were interviewing different schools about this, principals said things like: 'When there were some capable students in the school other students would look at them and say, "I can do that"', but without that head there was often no aspiration, or other students thought that what they were doing was par for the course. As a consequence of that, one of our projects in the SiMERR national centre was setting up a diagnostic test in science for year eight students. That has been so successful that it is now compulsory for every student in New South Wales. It identifies their strengths and weaknesses and also their standing in the state. The teachers get a realistic view and understanding of what the problems are for the children and where they stand relative to others.

Senator BACK—Can you tell us again what age or class that is for?

Prof. Pegg—They are in year eight—14-year-olds.

Senator BACK—At what time into year eight is it? Is it halfway through the year?

Prof. Pegg—They do it in November after they have had two years of secondary education.

Senator BACK—So years seven and eight are both secondary years?

Prof. Pegg—Yes, they are in New South Wales. The department and I had a meeting with DEEWR about the chance of that test going national. The benefit of that is that it really helps rural schools. It is not meant to be a threat to schools. It provides the school with answers to questions such as: what are the learning difficulties that your children have in science? There is a possibility that that test could become a national support. I mentioned before the professional isolation of teachers. Often teachers are alone—there may be a single teacher or two teachers in a rural school—and it is hard for them to find out where their children are placed. That has consequences for their expectations.

Senator O'BRIEN—How has the profession responded to material that is in your report?

Prof. Pegg—Sorry—what material?

Senator O'BRIEN—The recommendations and the findings.

Prof. Pegg—It has been very strong. The recommendations and findings have been used everywhere. Anywhere you see reports into rural education they will come back to them. Again, this sounds self-serving because I was on the report. We brought in the top people to do the stats for us and it was done independently. I ask you to read the recommendations. You will find that they are sensible. What they are saying is threefold. If you want to move rural education we are suggesting that there be something set up under COAG. What we were looking for was a national rural education school strategy, which would have a cohesive effect. If you put it under MCEETYA or, better still, under COAG, it could bring in health, transport and other things to look at the issues. That is the first plank.

The second plank is to bring education groups together with local communities to work through the issues there. The third plank is, again, integration—bringing research groups together. We are sort of offering ourselves, as a truly national body, to do national research initiatives. In the last four years, for example, we have carried out 140 projects in rural and regional Australia. I got an email last Monday about something I did not know. It said that, if you google SiMERR, there are more than 15,200 sites—what we have been working on or doing reports on. I have not checked that—

Senator O'BRIEN—It is mentioned widely.

Prof. Pegg—The other thing is that we get a lot of visitors. South Korea is very small, but they have a large problem in rural South Korea. Many of the universities in the United States have sent people to us, and it is the same with Canada. They like the national model, where we work collaboratively on research projects.

Senator O'BRIEN—This is no absolutely reflection on SiMERR, but having so many hits on Google does not tell you whether it is good, bad or indifferent.

Prof. Pegg—I take your point, but I was just flabbergasted. I had never even thought to do a search myself, and 15,200 impressed me.

CHAIR—It is still impressive.

Senator O'BRIEN—Yes, impressive. You have been noticed!

Prof. Pegg—As a consequence of that, people from other countries are visiting the University of New England.

Senator O'BRIEN—With the figures you have added to the PISA findings, where do we find the breakdown of each of the categories you have listed?

Prof. Pegg—I had to use the European database in France, and they already have it categorised under those headings.

Senator O'BRIEN—Can you make it easy for us and send us the breakdown of what they mean so that we can get an understanding and apply it to our own regions?

Prof. Pegg—Yes, I can do that. It will be slightly different but it will have the same effect. ACR did a more global one in 2003, and I have included that in my submission. It uses 'metropolitan' and 'provincial', and they have combined 'remote' and 'very remote' into one category. You will see that in the submission that I sent in. That is the ACR, which is exactly the same. But I can easily send you that information.

CHAIR—Thanks, that would be very useful.

Senator BACK—I found this to be a very interesting study. My family is a country family, and my wife taught right through our children's primary schooling. And you are right: we always said that, the day our oldest child got to secondary school, we would not be living in the country—and we were not. So everything you say is completely correct. A lot of this is a state issue. The delivery of education services is a state issue. I am very interested to know where the Commonwealth might have its role.

Prof. Pegg—In a sense it is a state issue. But rural and regional Australia account for 30 per cent of our population. Does the federal government want to have 30 per cent of children underperforming, as compared to metropolitan students? I see that as a federal issue. I have to be very careful here, because I do not want to keep saying that everything about rural areas is negative. You would know, having lived there, that there are lots of positives in rural areas. And Australia needs rural areas. We have to be more than just a few large cities around the coast. To have true nation-building, we need the rural areas. There are good practices in each state and territory, but those practices do not get out; they are not shared. They might look slightly different in West Australia or New South Wales, but the ideas are different. What we need is some sort of body that brings this information together and is at a high enough level, in terms of

research or policy, that those ideas can be moved around, shared, copied or modified in other areas.

Senator BACK—My only obvious experience is in Western Australia, where the capital city and two or three major coastal regional centres account for 95 per cent of the population. This is something I have spent most of my adult life looking at, and I am most interested in what you have said. There is a contrast between coastal towns and inland towns from a teacher's point of view and, as you have quite rightly observed, from the teacher flows the quality of education for children. In coastal towns the lifestyle is better and people tend to buy their homes because they maintain their value or offer a chance of capital gain. In inland Western Australia, almost uniquely, it is not possible to buy a place that retains its capital value.

Senator STERLE—Unless you are in Kalgoorlie.

Senator BACK—Even then, it is up and down. When Kalgoorlie is going well, you cannot buy a place for love or money; when Kalgoorlie is going badly, it fits the bill. In Newman you cannot buy a place for a million dollars—even if you can afford the million dollars, you cannot get a place. So what do we do? The education department in Western Australia now offers financial incentives to teachers to remain in inland towns.

Prof. Pegg—That is one of the recommendations in our report. The notion of five years is significant. If we can get teachers to stay in rural areas for five years, there would be a substantial improvement in student outcomes.

Senator BACK—I asked a question earlier about boarding schools. We have looked long and hard at this over time. In Western Australia, primary school finishes in year 7. There is plenty of anecdotal evidence of equivalent performance. Some stay in country towns and go to high school; others go to boarding schools, and the performance completely changes. So you are quite right. Unfortunately, although agricultural is very successful, the participants in it are not. In an awful lot of instances, the wife in a farming family says the kids, 'I want you to go to school in Perth because I want you to go to university so that you do not have to rely on a career as a farmer. If you do come back to farming, you will at least have a university degree.' Is that something that you have observed?

Prof. Pegg—Yes. The other thing is that, with the way farming is evolving, students need a knowledge of maths, science and technology, which is the other basis of what SiMERR is about. It is sort of self-fulfilling. Once the parents start saying they are going to start sending their children to boarding school, that takes the top off those schools and so on. But it would be so much better if they knew that these schools were getting outstanding results—so why risk sending them away from home when they could stay at home? My vision is that we have high-class schools that get good performance in rural areas. We should look nationally at ways to do that.

Senator BACK—This is a topic that has occupied an enormous number of hours in my family. We have come to the conclusion that the best chance is to get teachers who are getting towards the end of their teaching careers, whose children have gone through their formal secondary schooling and may even be in tertiary education. These people still have a love of education and they may well be interested in coming back—for all sorts of different reasons.

Prof. Pegg—Yes. And they have the ability to mentor and support other teachers. As I said to you earlier, I sometimes feel like I am walking on eggshells here. Young teachers are enthusiastic and very competent, they know their work and so on, but experience pays. You probably knew people when you were at school who had been teaching for 20 years, and you have heard the joke that you could do one year 20 times, and we have teachers like that out there. Somewhere around five years in the game—and it might be true in a lot of professions—it starts to show and you bring this additional experience and know-how to the situation. What happens in rural areas is that we have teachers for one, two or three years. If you think about it, what organisation in the world could survive where you keep turning over people every couple of years? The parliament would not work; nothing would work if you did not have a corporate memory following on and support people. Yet in rural schools it gets tolerated that people are there for just a couple of years. We have to be careful because, if we said that we do not have young teachers, then we would not have teachers at all. There is a lot of effort going on that but you have to appreciate that in the first year of teaching it is about thinking about yourself as a teacher, about your class, about discipline, about trying to come to grips with things. You know the subject area but how you are going to transmit that.

Senator BACK—They do not know much about teaching kids.

Prof. Pegg—Yes. There are a whole lot of other issues that you pick up, and there is this magic five years of training where things start to really matter.

Senator BACK—I am also interested in knowing whether you have observed in your studies the trend away from teachers being qualified and competent to teach in the sciences. Most of our country high schools in WA would not have properly qualified teachers teaching the science subjects. In fact they are now having to rely on some of these distance education programs in which the teacher becomes almost a tutor because they simply do not have the qualifications themselves.

Prof. Pegg—I just had a quick look through it there and it is in the report. From memory, it is four times more likely to have teachers teaching out of their subject area in rural areas than it is in metropolitan areas. So we have the data for that and it is a real problem. Another problem is that you are more likely to have year 11 or year 12 students in the one class. That is very challenging even for experienced teachers let alone for novice teachers learning the game to be able to deal with that sort of pressure. Again, this is what I come back to; I believe there needs to be some federal coordination in looking at this as a national problem. I believe that with Australian know-how and people working together cooperatively with that vision it can be solved.

Senator BACK—My final question relates to the national perspective and that is particularly relevant in my state of Western Australia where you have so many people coming in from the eastern states to work. One of the great frustrations of parents and kids is that there is not an equivalence of actual standing or status at a certain age. Thirty years ago it was not much of an issue; today it is a very, very commonly discussed issue.

CHAIR—I have one quick question before I pass to my colleagues here and I have an interest as I am a resident in a regional area. Have you done work or taken into account what I would call attitudinal aspects of schooling comparing metropolitan to regional or comparing across

schools at all? Very simply what I mean by that is that I have seen in some regional schools—and I am sure it occurs in some metropolitan ones as well—is that the issue of achievement is something frowned upon by students' peers and it pulls students back so they are not trying to achieve. Then there are schools where students are actually trying to achieve and it is seen as a good thing. I have probably put that very simplistically, but have you come across that?

Prof. Pegg—I understand what you are saying. I do not have any data that rural schools are any different from other schools. My off-the-cuff comment is that it is idiosyncratic. You can go anywhere and find schools in which kids do not want to get up on the stage to get certificates because they do not want to stand out from the group. It can often be a school issue or it could just be a group of students in their particular group. I have no data to suggest that that is the case.

CHAIR—I was interested in your submission where you talk about rural communities becoming involved and that they will take ownership. Would you like to give us a couple of examples of what you mean by that?

Prof. Pegg—It is this notion that having a policy on education will not solve rural education on its own. It is so complex that the community has to buy in. They have to say, 'We really value this.' They have to value the idea of having preservice teachers there. They have to value thinking about how they would encourage teachers there and what facilities they might have for teachers and how they might work to involve them in that community so that they become important in that community. It is about having the community there, upfront. It seems to me that if you look at those rural communities that are doing well you will find there is a substantial emphasis on education.

The largest study in New South Wales was done a couple of years ago. It had the name AESOP—An Exceptional Schooling Outcomes Project. It was ARC funded. The funding was over \$1 million. It was about a really interesting research question, which was that when you go to a high school you might find the maths faculty is getting outstanding outcomes from the children but that the science, English and other faculties in the school are not doing as well. How could that be when you have the same principal, same kids and same parent base? What is that group of teachers doing that is making that big difference in the school? If you go to another school it could be the English faculty that is doing well, with maths and science not doing so well. So this study was about asking whether we could find out the characteristics of those faculties that were getting outstanding outcomes.

As I said, the Department of Education New South Wales gave me access to their confidential databases. I would not say I signed my life away, but I spent eight months going through every faculty in every school in New South Wales. We promised we would go into 30 sites; we went into 50 sites. We spent a week at each of those sites to look out these faculties. As a consequence, we came up with seven books which are now used as the basis of professional development in a lot of New South Wales, a little bit in South Australia and some other states are using it. I was asked to speak to a Chicago education authority, which was a nice change going back the other way. There is a lot of research in the world about what principals or teachers might do; there is very little work about how groups of teachers do outstanding things.

Coming out of that was this notion of collaboration. When we went in and looked there were a whole lot of things we found, but we found that these teachers worked together as a team. Each

one of them individually might not have been legendary teachers but as a team they grew and made a difference. This is where this notion of five years came up. Nearly every teacher in all these schools we went to had been there for at least five years.

Senator STERLE—Just for the record, I spent 12 years running around Western Australia moving teachers in and out of just about every damn town. In fact, there are not many I have not been to moving teachers in and out. Everything that has been said today is not new to me. A classic example is one school in the wheat belt in Western Australia where there is one teacher for grades 1 to 7. I remember moving a teacher into what at the time was called an Aboriginal mission. You would not call it that now. It was Balgo Hills Mission, south of Halls Creek. When we got there to send a 21-year-old teacher fresh out of home and fresh out of college into what was a really rough Indigenous community at the time she bawled her eyes out. I even said to her, ‘I will put your beanbag, your six cartons and your stereo back on and I will take you back to Perth for free.’ because it just was not the smart way of placing teachers in these areas. There are a whole range of issues and clearly these figures are very wide-ranging. We are short of time, so is it possible to provide for the committee the definition of ‘provincial’ and ‘remote’?

Prof. Pegg—Yes. Those are Australia MCEETYA definitions. I have used the words ‘provincial’, ‘metropol’s and ‘remote’. They are Australian words. I can send the definitions to you easily.

Senator STERLE—Because if this was superimposed on a map of Western Australia I reckon I could just about—

Prof. Pegg—Yes, you would pick it.

Senator STERLE—In fact, I might even enlighten you, Professor! It does not surprise me one little bit. Being a good member of the committee, I will not take up any more time.

CHAIR—Professor Pegg, thank you very much. That was very useful for the committee. We do appreciate your time.

Prof. Pegg—There are other problems, like you have said, in very remote communities. We have this program called QuickSmart which we have again developed through the national centre. In 30 weeks children can grow two to four years in literacy or numeracy. We went into an Indigenous school in the Northern Territory that had never had a child above the benchmark. They put 19 kids on the program. At the end of the program, 18 were above the benchmark and one missed out on the benchmark by one mark.

CHAIR—Fantastic.

Prof. Pegg—Everybody was so excited. Then we went back the next year to see how it was going and found the program was not being offered in the school. When I asked why, it was because every teacher, including the principal and deputy, had transferred out. So the whole staff had left and a brand new principal and staff had come in. Your comment triggered this. We know that in these areas it takes over a year for teachers to come to grips with the issues of working in that area.

Senator STERLE—It is not rocket science.

Prof. Pegg—No.

Senator STERLE—This is the frustrating part.

Prof. Pegg—But, to finish, I would come back to this notion of collaboration. We need more than education, maybe working through COAG so that the premiers have input into it. But, on behalf of SiMERR, I also believe we have a program that I have funded and costed that would move to address this. Our federal funding has ceased, so we have no funding at all currently. That funding would allow us to move into consolidation.

CHAIR—Professor Pegg, thank you very much.

Proceedings suspended from 3.01 pm to 3.07 pm

BAKER, Professor Graham, Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Scholarship), University of Southern Queensland

PETTIGREW, Professor Alan, Vice-Chancellor and Chief Executive Officer, University of New England

ROTHWELL, Professor Bryan, Head of Campus, Tweed Heads and Gold Coast, Southern Cross University

THOMAS, Professor Paul, AM, Vice-Chancellor and President, University of the Sunshine Coast

CHAIR—Welcome. Thank you all very much for taking the time to come today. We appreciate it very much. Southern Cross University has lodged submissions 81 and 244, the University of New England has lodged submission 558, the University of the Sunshine Coast has lodged submission 559 and the University of Southern Queensland has lodged submission 560. Do you wish to make any alterations or amendments to your submissions?

Prof. Pettigrew—There are a couple of small editorial corrections that I would like to make to our submission.

CHAIR—Certainly. I invite you to make some opening statements.

Prof. Pettigrew—You have heard from John Pegg, who is a colleague of mine at the University of New England, about secondary education. The whole purpose of the submission from the university is to reinforce the necessity of having a strong and robust tertiary education sector which serves regional areas of Australia, particularly rural and remote areas, in one way or another. John's work, as you have heard, centres on rural disadvantage in secondary education. The way that John has gone about that work—and I am using this as an exemplar—is that his skill base has come from working in rural settings. He has set up his whole research program and all of the work that he has done at UNE which is a rurally based university. That is an exemplar of a philosophy, which we are following as a university, which is that you need to train people in tertiary education in a rural setting. The evidence shows that they are more likely to stay in a rural setting and serve rural Australia. That is what is underpinning our thrust. It is why we created the joint medical program with University of Newcastle. It underpins our whole exercise in education. It even underpins our exercises in providing law training, as well as in other professions such as health and I could go on. We are not just an agricultural institution; we are much broader than that and we provide graduates on a much broader base. I think that that base is essential for the wellbeing of the whole of the rural sector in Australia. My colleagues to my left would have a similar view, although I do point out that they are all based on the coast.

I want to make a couple of other major points. For students who come to a place like the University of New England it is really a major commitment for them to move from their location. In fact, we have a very high percentage of students who have come from more than 60 kilometres away to study on our campus. That imposes a significant increased cost on students. The other point I wish to emphasise is that the current funding arrangements for students and

those forecast in the current government changes to student funding mechanisms still require students to find part-time employment to survive. In a town of 24½ thousand people in Armidale it is not very convenient and not very easy to find part-time work in order to support themselves for their living costs while they are in college or indeed living in town and for all the additional costs which they have to pay through their education. The changes in legislation and funding for students will help but I wanted to summarise by saying that there are other students in that mix who will not be as assisted by those changes as we might have hoped.

Prof. Baker—I am certainly going to support Professor Pettigrew in his basic stance and supplement if I may with a couple of other issues. Firstly, it is quite true that we all face this dilemma of wanting to train students locally in regional areas to stay there and work there. In our world, in the wake of the Bradley review and the government's targets that have flowed from there, if you look at the demand or the supply that is required to train the extra 284,000 degree qualified people in Australia, where they are going to come from is a really significant issue.

I will tie the two things together. I could not help but overhear Senator Back's comment earlier about Western Australia. In Queensland, I am sure you would be aware that as fast as Brisbane is growing it still only contains half the population of Queensland. Therefore it makes a good common sense, let alone supporting regional areas, to seek participation from right across the state and that is a real challenge for some of the financial reasons that Professor Pettigrew alluded to. The same issue would apply to northern New South Wales, I am certain. For those financial reasons I think it is also a challenge, but it also means that we would really want to be able to strengthen regional universities for that reason to supply the skills base in those regional areas for those benefits downstream from regional areas.

I would go one stage further. It is true you might argue that you could train people anywhere, but two of Australia's largest industries, mining and agriculture, are in regional Australia and there is a very powerful argument to talk about the training skills base and those major industries being co-located so to speak. It is not surprising, given the group here, that we would be passionate about the strength of regional universities. We hope that the inquiry and the parliament generally support those views. In particular detail we may have a chance to flesh out some of the issues. Certainly, some of the things around student support that Professor Pettigrew has already started to talk about I would endorse wholeheartedly but I would also bravely put a suggestion, I say 'bravely' in the sense that I have not asked my colleagues whether or not they agree with me.

I think that in terms of a solution to enhance regional universities and provide a greater skills base in regional Australia for me mobility is the key. If we can find ways to move people from metropolitan areas to regional universities to study and not just be the fishnet to catch regional students, we should do that absolutely. I think there is another string to the bow. Most of the major metropolitan universities do a fine job, but they are grossly overcrowded and one could shave 10 per cent of the student numbers off the top and it would not hurt them at all. It is a serious point; it is not a tradition in this country.

There is a suggestion that I would put on the table that is perhaps worth thinking about, though I would hope the answer came out right. The government and the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations have talked about reviewing what we call regional loading. We all get an extra bucket of money, not a large one it has to be said, but one to help

support us support those students. There may be alternative ways to restructure that loading so it stays with the universities, but follows a different principle. The current principle post Bradley has been to provide more support to students, to encourage more students to go to university, thereby giving university more funding. One might do the same thing with regional loading to encourage people out of cities into regional universities—not to let the bleed and the drain go the opposite way, but to encourage that migration, if I can put it that way, in a training sense. That might be a good outcome for all of us, but I absolutely support the basic stance that providing training and building the skills base in regional Australia is good for everybody.

Prof. Thomas—I would like to amplify a few points, if I may, in my submission relating to growth and development, particularly, and obviously, from the University of the Sunshine Coast's point view. A thing that bugs me sometimes is that regional universities are somehow lumped together and people imagine that they are suffering or benefiting from the same kinds of issues, and that clearly is not the case. Universities that serve regional and rural populations in Australia are very different institutions. Mine at the Sunshine Coast is very different in the sense that it is the newest public university in Australia; it has only been open for 12 years. One of the problems we suffer is that we are seen by the regional population as a university for a defined region, but the state government views us very much as part of South-East Queensland. South-East Queensland beneficiaries are major metropolitan universities, not the University of the Sunshine Coast, and yet the Sunshine Coast university serves a very distinct population, which is predominantly rural, regional, first in family, low SES—all of those issues that confront regional Australia are writ large on the Sunshine Coast.

We have developed a sense of alignment with the community over the past 10 years—we have worked on it very hard—where now the community feel that the institution is a very important part of the development of the coast and they see the movement for a surf culture, for example, and the automatic brain drain that used to occur is being at least abbreviated. We have not turned it around completely, but we are attempting to do that. We have done it quite well too. When there was a QUT presence out at Brisbane on the Sunshine Coast—and I know it well because I was at QUT at the time—the most preferences for the Sunshine Coast were about 200 students. Once they had a university open for the Sunshine Coast, named Sunshine Coast university in 1996, we had 550 people in our first intake and we have grown to 7,000 at the present time. That is an annual growth of 10 per cent per year and few universities in this country could match that. It is not only a reflection of the growth of the region, but it is also a reflection of our attractiveness to a much wider population from overseas and interstate as well.

As I said initially, the population which we draw into the university, we know that over 50 per cent of them are on Centrelink benefits of one kind or another. And yet on the current Commonwealth postcode arrangements that identify low SES, which will influence payments coming to universities under the post Bradley review, only 11 per cent of our students are currently defined as low SES. That mismatch between 11 per cent and over 50 per cent is really quite stark when it will come to financing low SES students. I would strongly urge you to press for an urgent review of the postcode definition of low SES because from our known information it is totally inadequate.

The other point I would like to make is with respect to capital. As I have said, in our first 12 years we have been growing at 10 per cent per year. The biggest problem we have had to confront is the lack of capital for major buildings, and that is still our major problem. To develop

the infrastructure that we have, we have had to take out loans which are currently standing at \$24 million because all we have been a beneficiary of is \$1.5 million to \$2½ million capital development pooled moneys every now and again. It has not been enough to build on the scale that we need to accommodate that population. And my great worry at the present time is that the heavily front-loaded Education Investment Fund, which has been drawn on to support universities, when you look at the distribution of those billions of dollars worth of funds to date, they have gone principally to the Go8, principally to metropolitan universities and principally to New South Wales and Victorian metropolitan universities. Apart from two or three cases, regional and rural universities, or populations being admitted to those universities, have hardly had any benefit at all from the Education Investment Fund, and yet it is heavily front-loaded.

In a sense, the world-class agenda or aspirations of a Melbourne or an ANU to become even more significant on the world stage—and I am sure they are putting in terrific cases to warrant those grants being given to them—is fine. But there is another issue—that is, Julia Gillard’s social inclusion agenda, which heavily rests on having more rural and regional students admitted to universities. At the moment, those EIF moneys are running out at a rate of knots and if we do not benefit as growth regional universities then we are in serious trouble. If you look at some of these structural reform guidelines that have been issued to date, for example, where there are hundreds of millions of dollars again to be distributed, they are currently framed in a way that seem to favour those universities that are in deep trouble and that are contemplating amalgamation or will be in financial difficulties by 2011-12. So at the one end of the scale, moneys are being distributed to the very successful, the structural adjustment moneys are being given to the ones in difficulties, and at the other end of the scale, universities like my own, which is a real success story, are failing to get the sums of money we need to deal with the students even though we are growing by 10 per cent a year and we are bursting at the seams to admit students who are, for the most part, low SES and first in family. They are quite clearly the kinds of people that Julia Gillard wants to see included in larger numbers in the new agenda. They are two points in particular that I wanted to emphasise that bear on a university like ours that has suffered considerable disadvantages of a new university in this country that many other universities previously have not suffered from.

Prof. Rothwell—It is ‘me too’, and very much so ‘me too’. But I would like to add an additional perspective. We have put in two submissions, one of which is very much the university perspective from the vice-chancellor, but the university went on to put in a second submission because we thought it would be helpful to the inquiry. This is the one which has in it a subset of the statistics from the national university in regional Australia feasibility study. I do not know whether I need to explain further what that study is, but obviously it is a federal government funded study, which we undertook along with Charles Sturt University. The study was largely done by PhillipsKPA. We put this broad information in purely and simply because it looks at regional Australia. While the report will reference significant factors for the two universities, the information base that it came up with is particularly important.

In saying that, if I can draw you to the analysis—unfortunately the pages are not numbered, but it is about four pages in—where it looks at needs and opportunities which have come out from these statistics. It clearly identifies for regional Australia—this is not to do with Southern Cross University or Charles Sturt, as the two institutions involved—those needs along access, participation, attainment, the regional labour force requirements, which again are fairly obvious,

and the sustainability of regional universities, especially the small campuses. A lot of that has been referred to by Professor Thomas.

The opportunities, though, are clearly coming out from the report as well. These in particular come out with the very last point to be emphasised, which is the potential for some form of collaboration or integration of regional universities to deliver benefits through the increased scope of the programs, the consolidation of the expertise across the institutions, the shared use of facilities and the increased opportunities.

I know this was one of the key points on which the analysis was done—looking at that feasibility—but what has come out is quite significant. In terms of how we are going to be successful in satisfying students' education in the regions, there is a strong view forming that we are going to have to do it by getting critical mass within ourselves as an education grouping, not by expecting that any one individual institution can go and grab its own critical mass, because the chances of that happening in Australia are pretty remote.

That concept is not going to come about as amalgamated universities or anything at this stage—that is not on the cards—but certainly there is the idea of coming together and helping to get critical mass. It may well be that in some of these difficult areas—in engineering, for instance, and that sort of thing—by coming together we would have far more success in both our research and our teaching.

Supporting that—and I can refer to the whole report in a minute—is a comment coming out from the first report about our own institution. There you will see a flag going up which says that we must, in the regions, make sure that we get the broadband links coming through. This technology for us will be critical. If we want to go together across distances, then we need to be able to go together with the top level of technology. We know it is not impossible. We know there are very good examples. The contribution of the USQ teams alone, nationally and internationally, is enormous. There are ways we can do this, but the broadband project is critical to us coming into the rural and regional areas. If we have not got that, we are then genuinely second class, and we cannot afford to be that.

The linking of those two—the technology backing up, the coming together—is the only point I would pull out. Other than that I would say to the committee that the full report is within a couple of weeks of completion, and then it will be a submission to Minister Gillard. Obviously from there you would be able to access it and it would become a public document.

CHAIR—Thank you. As deputy chair of the broadband inquiry, I could not agree with you more. Senator Back?

Senator BACK—Gentlemen, I thank you very much for the material sent to us and your introductory comments. I was on the faculty at the Muresk Institute, and I have to report to you that Muresk looks like it is closing, regrettably—for many reasons, but one of them is that we just have not got sufficient agriculture and agribusiness students who want to actually live in the country. That is of tremendous concern. Professor Pettigrew, do you think there is scope for a national approach to agriculture and agribusiness education, rather than each of the states attending to their own? Is there a capacity for a core of programs—perhaps picking up on some of Professor Thomas's comments—that can be shared and then regionalised?

Prof. Pettigrew—I can be very brief and say yes in answer to that. It is already happening. Without revealing too much to my colleagues on my left in the competitive process of winning EIF bids, we are teaming with another metropolitan GO8 university with respect to the whole issue of agriculture, environment, sustainability and so on. That process has already started from our perspective. I have spoken to another GO8 vice-chancellor who has prominence in the field of agriculture in your state—so I have therefore named the university and the vice-chancellor concerned. But we have started informal discussions about how we can team up. I would re-emphasise the importance of the National Broadband Network to allow us to do that efficiently and effectively so that we have strong research activity going and can share resources, experience and courses. The courses might be delivered from UWA, the University of Sydney and UNE in a teamwork way. That is the future of the whole game. You are right: there are insufficient students attracted to each of those universities alone. If we team up, we will do it better.

CHAIR—So you would be supportive of the broadband rollout starting in the regions?

Prof. Pettigrew—Absolutely.

CHAIR—Thank you very much.

Prof. Pettigrew—The sooner the better.

Senator O'BRIEN—It is starting in my region.

Senator BACK—The only problem in your region is that nobody wants to take it up.

Senator O'BRIEN—Don't you believe that.

Senator BACK—I endorse very much the dot point that you and Professor Thomas referred to with regard to this very aspect, which is that there just has to be rationalisation and improvement. At the end of the day, the capacity for the students has to be improved. This committee is addressing the whole business of youth allowance and access to tertiary studies, particularly in rural and regional areas. Has it been your experience that finance or capacity to pay to university in rural, remote and regional areas has been a barrier for people at the lower socioeconomic end of the scale or has it not? Could you comment on where you think we should be going with youth allowance.

Prof. Thomas—On the mostly anecdotal information that we have had on the Sunshine Coast, it has certainly been a barrier. When I was at QUT, for example, all we were able to attract in the way of student numbers to a very small campus was 180. They did not have a campus that was their own university. They knew that if they went to that campus for QUT it would be a feeder in that they would have to go to a city university, QUT, for the second and third years of the course. They could not afford to do that. Typically, moving to a city will cost anywhere between \$10,000 and \$20,000 a year in addition to what they are paying for their education. Most of the people on the Sunshine Coast, because they are 50 to 55 per cent low SES students, just have not got that kind of money in the family. There is no doubt that we have to build the capacity of our university to become more comprehensive than it is at the moment to serve the needs of the population currently in the inner Sunshine Coast of 300,000, which is comparable to Wollongong in the Illawarra region and which is set to grow in the next 20 years to 500,000. The

greater region on which we draw at the moment is already 500,000, and yet it has one university. When you look at Canberra and compare the population to universities, the difference is really quite dramatic.

Senator BACK—The minister, I believe, is going to relax the criteria for the gap year. Is that going to assist students who you understand are preparing to come to your universities?

Prof. Pettigrew—I think that it will provide short-term help for those who are in the gap year at the moment. But there is another sting in the tail in terms of a shift in banding one of the financial indicators on that.

Senator BACK—Because of the neutrality.

Prof. Pettigrew—That is right.

Senator BACK—I think is a question more to you, Professor Pettigrew. There is this question of farming property being an asset. If it is worth below \$2.28 million, there is assistance available; if it is worth above that, there is not. I know in our own state that there would not be any farming properties with a value as low as \$2.28 million to be viable. For the families and the students that are contemplating coming to your university, and the other gentlemen can answer if appropriate, is that likely to be a barrier for them?

Prof. Pettigrew—I think so. My general reaction on the advice that I have been given is similar to your comment. That asset value is still a very cash poor farming property. That will be a barrier insofar as there just is not the wherewithal for those students to come.

Prof. Baker—Firstly, I agree absolutely with Alan's comment. We certainly see the asset rich and cash poor having exactly that problem. While we support the relaxation that Minister Gillard has put forward, there are some anomalies that need clarification. There are people caught betwixt and between at the moment. Whereas once they left home to be independent and to work and demonstrate independence, now they are being told that if they go straight to study they are independent. There are some out there who are caught in no man's land, if I may put it that way. It certainly is an issue. If we want to keep those people in regional Australia and enable them to stay at home or study from home by distance or by going to the nearest university—whichever—that asset definition is a real problem for us all.

I want to comment on your previous question about general financial difficulties. There is a sleeper that is not really very visible. I overheard your earlier comments about students leaving the farm, as it were, because their parents are worried about them. Our experience is that families are just worried. Because many of them, as Paul said, are first-in-family university students, they do not have university experience, so they are nervous also about sending them out to the university world. What happens is that many of them come to us as part-time students. They work part time because they cannot afford to study full time. That is a reflection of the on campus students. You have heard that at my university 70 per cent of our students study by distance. They are also caught in a few youth allowance anomalies. That has a real impact on their study. They are having to work very hard and very long hours, and the number of hours is increasing. I would say that of any students, but you see it more noticeably with this particular

set of students. It is a real catch for them. They simply cannot afford to pack up their bags and come on campus. It is a problem.

Prof. Rothwell—Twenty-two per cent of our students are low SES students anyway. On our analysis, we have students who are studying full time and each one averaging 25 hours a week working to keep going. And they are on all their allowances and that sort of thing. That is an enormous load. How on earth they get through, I do not know. It has been eased somewhat by our running into the three-session year so that they can spread. That makes their life more liveable. But these earner-learners are becoming a significant part of our student population in the very group of students that we are being asked to increase with our intakes.

Prof. Thomas—While we are talking about things economic, I wonder if I could add another dimension. At the moment, we are beginning discussions with the Commonwealth about the nature of compacts and the in which they will circumscribe what individual universities do and how they will be funded against their missions and their key performance indicators. An interesting one has been downplayed in the Bradley report with respect to the economic impact of a university serving regional and rural students. Bradley has said that there should really be a two-pronged approach to the definition of ‘compacts’, one with respect to teaching and one with respect to research, which none of us would have any problems with. Those are the core areas of what universities are expected to address. Where they have underplayed universities in regions is in the fact that we have other roles to do with serving the community—contributing to regional advancement, for example, and regional economic development. If we sat at our university and simply taught students and encouraged them to conduct research, the best of them would still leave the region, because there are no jobs.

We as a university have got to do something about promoting job generation. We do that by having built an innovation centre and having created 50 new companies and over 500 jobs in which students can gain experience when they are undertaking a degree. They can get jobs in them and can even be given help in starting up their own companies in the region. That is a vital part of us not just educating students but keeping them in the region once they have graduate. Yet, unless we are able to convince the Commonwealth that Bradley perhaps underplayed this, we still have a task in front of us to get that third dimension of what regional universities do addressed.

CHAIR—Just while we are slightly back on the youth allowance issue, there are a couple of things I have significant concerns about. One is the current proposals for the independent youth allowance criteria which are going to mean that the students will have to defer for two years. In your view, is that appropriate for a criterion for independent qualifications? As all of you are here: are the universities likely to approve deferrals for two years? And, again from the perspective of the university, are students more likely to not go on to university once they have already taken two years out, if you like, before they go on to tertiary education?

Prof. Baker—If it is a requirement, I think it is a bad requirement, for the reasons you have said yourself. All of our experience is that once students get out they go into a different path in life. They may come back out. Some of us have experience of training, particularly by distance education, mature age students of anywhere from 19 to 35, but that is a harder route for them to follow. So I think as a requirement to demonstrate independence it is pretty tough. If they choose to, on the other hand, we should be able to accommodate it.

It does provide some odd internal constraints. In my mind—and others may have a different view—it is not something we would legislate for or against, but the difficulty is that with a distance education student, typically studying half time—pick a nursing degree—four years become eight years. If you add two years gap at the front, it means the university has to keep a program open for 10 years from today. So there are strange internal constraints that affect particularly those—most of us here—who have the part-time and long-running student cohort. I think it is tough to make a requirement for two years.

CHAIR—Just on that, too, one of the things is about the deferment. A student raised with me the other day the fact that they had worked terribly hard, they had just got the mark to scrape into the course that they wanted to and they were deferring for the year. They were not sure whether, if the following year there was a change in the requirements from the university and that mark was higher, they would even be able to get in. Is that correct? I do not understand those sorts of processes extremely well. Does she have a valid point that it would be a possibility that the entrance mark itself might change in that second year and preclude her from doing it?

Prof. Baker—Others can speak for their enrolment procedures, but I think most of us would take the view that, if we made an offer, the offer would stand.

CHAIR—It would stand for the two years. Okay, that is good to know.

Prof. Baker—If it was an actual offer, it should stand.

Prof. Pettigrew—I agree. I think there is almost a need for another inquiry into distance education and what it means for tertiary education in general. Like my colleague sitting to my left, we have 80 per cent of our students studying by distance education. Their average load is just under half of a load; therefore they take twice as long to go through their degree programs. They need more and more support to maintain their activity, and they are usually mature age, so they are working at the same time.

It just adds a whole new dimension to the study programs of individuals which we have to support as a university. We have 18,000 people enrolled at the university, but we are funded for 9,000 equivalent full-time students, so our costs are double because we have to deal with all the bodies but we get only half the value, as it were, per student. So there are a whole range of other issues that arise out of this whole provision by distance education, which services people in remote and rural communities—albeit by distance education we are also training a lot of people in Sydney, Melbourne, Perth and around the country, because that is the opportunity that they want. They want flexible delivery in the times when they can actually do it, and we serve that market.

It is not the also-rans; it is the additional component of our load and demographic which is serving people in rural and remote communities by the same methodology. The added cost to the university of providing the support structures, both administratively and academically, to help them by remote control, if you like, with their essay writing and to help them get prepared to do tertiary study is an additional cost which we do not get funded specifically for, but we do it.

CHAIR—I have two more questions before I pass to my colleagues. One is: in your view, then, on the issue of the independent youth allowance criteria, should there be some form of

criteria in there that would retain just the one-year deferment? Do you think that the current provision should have been kept with perhaps some tweaking to address any of the perceived sorting that was going on?

Prof. Baker—I would not be able to analyse on the spot, so to speak, but it seems to me to be very—

CHAIR—I am quite happy for you to take that on notice, if you would like to take it on notice and give it some thought. Given that the two-year deferment is not perhaps the optimum, is there a way to retain a type of one-year deferment for independent youth allowance criteria? The other thing I would like your comment on as well—and, again, I am happy for you to take this on notice—is that, as you would be well aware, one of the recommendations of the Victorian government education committee was to have independent youth allowance granted to those students who were required to live away from home, regardless of financial assets. I would be very interested in your views on whether or not that would be an appropriate form of assistance, obviously with some requirements around it.

Prof. Baker—Firstly, we will take that one on notice. I think the one year would be helpful so long as we can put the appropriate constraints around it. As a matter of process, would you ask us to write—not another submission?

CHAIR—No, if you could just briefly write to the committee through the committee secretary, that would be fine.

Prof. Baker—On your second question, I start with my opening remarks. As I say, I may be standing alone on this one, but I think the principle of supporting students to attend university and structuring that so that, for us, it supports only those who choose to go to regional universities, because that is a bigger cost constraint or impost on them, would be a very good thing. It is hard to say why somebody in one suburb of Brisbane would need a relocation to go across town to another Brisbane university, but if they live in Taringa, a suburb in Brisbane, and choose to go to the University of the Sunshine Coast, UNE or USQ, I think that would be a very good thing. I repeat: I would actually be in favour of an analysis that said, ‘Let’s openly take the regional loading and turn it into something that only would apply to students leaving metropolitan areas in order to enhance that capacity out in regional areas.’

Prof. Rothwell—The only other element of youth allowance I am aware of, and only anecdotally, where the government are thinking of doing something that might be difficult for us is where they are charging rent or allowing rent against a distance of a certain number of kilometres away. We understand that this factor is such that the regional areas would be disadvantaged by this, because it seems to be too urban based. That is from one piece of advice that we were given from Canberra. That is the only other area where we could help in another dimension.

Whilst I am speaking, can I just add something that is very much my life, if you like. I have been with external or distance education—whatever words you want to use—for many, many years. We really have to forget about those terms. My colleagues here know exactly what I mean about this. The real problem is that we are educating for circumstance—persons who have circumstances which dictate what and how they study. The fact that we call it ‘distance’

education is wrong; it is not necessarily distance at all. It could be just 10 minutes away. We are having to fund and deliver to persons who have circumstantial difficulties. They can be anywhere, of course. The technology to do that is important. So I am desperately looking for a word that means that.

CHAIR—A new definition.

Prof. Rothwell—I have not found one yet.

Senator BACK—Are you then pleading for a higher fee per capita or per student hour taught as a result of that? Is that the point you are making—that it costs more per hour to deliver the service to those people?

Prof. Rothwell—Yes. The assumption is that there should be a level playing field and therefore the costs to one group of students should be no different from those to another. That is the basis we are on now, but I do think we have to recognise the sorts of things that Professor Pettigrew was saying about the administration, the management, of a student body that has all this variety of circumstantial difficulties, which we accommodate. We accommodate them in the institutions in the regions and then service them with the academic need. This circumstantial angle is in fact very important to us, and it costs.

Senator BACK—And it is not being recognised.

Prof. Rothwell—And it is not being recognised.

Senator BACK—Thanks.

Prof. Thomas—It is an interesting one on the Sunshine Coast because the students, we are clear, need greater flexibility. Sometimes they want to come to some lectures; sometimes they do not. They want to study at home. They might find it difficult to get transport within the region to the university. So they want flexibility. But some of the local councillors, for example, in what is now the new regional council of the Sunshine Coast, depending on their constituency, want a campus or a learning centre of some kind in their particular jurisdiction. They want to proliferate these small campuses that are really extraordinarily expensive to run when the students do not want them. It is good for politicians, perhaps, but it is not good for the students. The students want the flexibility of access to lecturers, laboratories, the library, other students, the cafes and the life of a university. They do not want the proliferation of these small, expensive campuses. Trying to balance those two within a region like the Sunshine Coast is quite politically difficult.

Senator O'BRIEN—There were a number of issues there. I want to go back to a theme from earlier on, which is the broadband issue, and link it to what you were just saying and some of the issues about travel et cetera. Isn't it the case that we are going to see the delivery of courses in a much more flexible way using broadband? The attendance at campus for a lot of students will be very occasional, their connections will be by email and linkages on the net in tutorials and they will see a lecture by putting in a PIN and downloading it on their home computer as much as they will by attending. Access by all students, regional or otherwise, may be dependent on access to that technology as much as anything else.

Prof. Thomas—They want that flexibility—I cannot stress that too strongly—but there is no sign of that diminishing the amount of time they want to spend on campus. Because they are low SES, because they are the first in family to university, they need that interpersonal support that is given at the lecturers in a one-to-one relationship. They are not confident enough yet to use the technology alone. It needs to be supported, in our experience, and they really value the closeness of contact. Our university is known for providing that level of support to those students, first in family, who want that level of support.

Senator O'BRIEN—I am not saying that students will not go to campus to get over problems and meet with lecturers where they cannot do it by email—if they can get those tutors or lecturers when they want access.

Prof. Thomas—And it is still important as a marriage market. It is the most important marriage market we know in the Western world.

CHAIR—I was just going to make the point about university life and social interaction, having been to a regional university a long time ago.

Prof. Pettigrew—Could I add a couple of comments to the same question. My view differs a little bit from Paul's because we have a different demographic totally. As I said earlier, 80 per cent of our students communicate with us via emails, the internet and so on and we have adopted a whole range of new strategies to facilitate student interaction with their academic colleagues on the campus. There are a whole new variety of ways of doing that communication and making them feel as though they are actually part of a university, in a virtual sense.

Senator O'BRIEN—Are most of those 80 per cent mature age?

Prof. Pettigrew—Yes, the majority of them would be. And we are exploring new ways of teaching. We have a grant from the Commonwealth government to make sure that distance education is delivered in a pedagogically sound way, which goes to the whole process of setting up courses, delivering them and examining them at the end and all that sort of thing.

To come back to your summary question, I agree with you completely. I think that in five years time higher education is going to look very different to the way it does today. I understand where Paul is coming from with people on campus who need that face-to-face, but I often talk to staff at my university to say: 'Think about those children in the younger years of high school at the moment who might be 12, 13 or 14 years old. In five years time they will be coming to university. What are they going to expect when they get to university, knowing how much they interact with mobile phones and computers now?' Every day of the week they are on the net and that is their learning environment now. What will they expect when they come to university? They will expect to be doing it similarly and I think that the whole shape of tertiary education in five to 10 years time will be a very different animal to the way it is now.

Prof. Baker—I think it is quite true; you are getting slightly different demographics. But I would absolutely agree with everything that Alan said. In fact, there is a small part at the back of our own submission on this. It will actually be interesting to see where online education goes. We have 19,000 students who are not in Toowoomba. Seven thousand of those are somewhere in South-East Asia and the rest are all over Australia, and they study online. The next generation,

which we are starting to build, is a computerised interactivity. You sit here and you look there—that person could be in Chicago, but it is a vision on a wall. You can almost close the loop. I do not agree that face to face is the only way to educate, even though that is my own teaching experience, but getting interaction is extremely important, and online education is not as simple as students downloading things. They do actually interact directly with staff via discussion groups and all sorts of clever things.

And we absolutely need the broadband roll-out. At the moment you would have to say that students west of somewhere are impoverished because of the access dropping out and all sorts of terrible things like that. The ability to give them a really high quality service and education with broadband, via the kinds of things we are talking about, is just around the corner.

Senator O'BRIEN—Yes. Getting back to Youth Allowance, I would have thought that the reduction of the age where independence is assumed from 25 to 22 would be perceived as a positive move in your sector, and the increase in the threshold below which there is no reduction in Youth Allowance for those who attract it, from \$236 to \$400, if you can get the work, is also a positive. The increase in the parental income threshold for families, particularly those with more than one child in university education, would be a positive as well. It is a question of how you fund all of those things.

Prof. Baker—I have just a quick comment on the age issue. Bryan has already mentioned it. We all have the experience in vocational areas where a lot of our students, particularly the external ones, are working in a similar, allied environment: if they are studying engineering they may be working in a manufacturing plant somewhere and upskilling. In those areas, typically, the median age for us is about 26, so lowering that bar is going to be very, very helpful.

Prof. Thomas—One of the reasons why Alan is enthusiastic and Graham is more enthusiastic than I am about the flexible learning is that, decades ago, we had distance education centres established in this country and there were certain universities, eight of them, that were given quite powerful backing financially to establish themselves as distance education centres and have developed a level of infrastructure that, for example, a university like ours, at 12 years of age, does not have. So we do not have the capacity that these two universities have to do those flexible things that we know should be done, along with face-to-face teaching.

Senator O'BRIEN—But your advantage is that they have made the mistakes and ironed them out—and you are coming into the new technology as well.

Prof. Thomas—Absolutely! We are forging a new way!

CHAIR—Good on you, Pollyanna!

Prof. Rothwell—And we are no doubt going the other way and putting the two together, coming up with the converged, blended learning projects—

Senator O'BRIEN—I am sure there are plenty of things that no-one has thought of that will be—

Prof. Rothwell—whereby you do not differentiate necessarily between the internal student and the so-called distance student. They both do the same subject, with the same options available to them, and they choose how they will study, which is the way we are trying to go.

Senator O'BRIEN—Now, I see there is discussion about the sustainability of regional universities and small campuses, and that has been touched upon. Regional communities that have campuses want to keep them because they put a well-educated cohort into their community, they put significant jobs into their community; they have a very important impact. My office is in Launceston, and having the campus of UTAS and the Maritime College there is an important input into the whole of the community. In this future of education where we have got a lot of online learning, does that mean we are going to see fewer regional recognised regional centres and more centralisation and smaller outposts of universities, city or regional, to provide some sort of interface. Is that how you see the future?

Prof. Baker—'Yes' would probably be the quick answer, but for purely financial reasons. You are quite right. Paul made a very good point a minute ago about universities building lots of little campuses. They are neither good student experiences, necessarily, because they are quite lean and mean, but they still cost quite a bit for the organisation to run. At a certain point, when you get out there, they become so small that they are simply not viable. The flip side, though, is to say that it is possible given the range of infrastructure, particularly in a place like Queensland—its demographic is a little different, I guess. There are other organisations—maybe the agricultural college or the local TAFE college—where you can share facilities and build a node there. That may be smaller than a university campus but nonetheless it has a direct connection with the main campuses, if you do it right. So it is a real challenge to get the right balance.

One of the marketing things that I am sure that all of us notice is that if you are the only campus in town you will attract 65 per cent of the students who want to do the things you have got. It is complex when there are, like in Brisbane, three universities within visible distance of each other. But for most of us that would be the kind of order of magnitude. So you extrapolate communities—therefore, if you put it, say, here, 65 per cent of our students will go to you, and it is probably true. But sometimes that 65 per cent is so small that you cannot manage it.

Prof. Thomas—That is an interesting point. Much of the focus out of Bradley has been around whether we need a national regional university—whether we need to rationalise what is going on within the regions and join them up in some way. Most of the focus has been on the problems associated with regional and rural universities. As Graham has just indicated, in Victoria, around Melbourne, we have eight universities, all of them with libraries, all of them with IT centres, all of them with HR centres—all of them replicating resources within three quarters of an hour of eight universities. Why aren't we looking with equal force at what is happening about concentrating resources in metropolitan areas instead of looking at small amounts of money supporting what we need to do in regional Australia alone, as though that is the only problem?

Senator BACK—You are preaching to the converted here!

Senator STERLE—But it goes a lot deeper than that, doesn't it, because of the issue of mobility, which you mentioned, Professor Baker. Along with that comes a lot of other challenges in terms of accommodation and prospects of employment, whether it is part-time or once you

leave. So I hear what you are saying, but those eight universities in Melbourne—and I do not know the difference in the delivery of courses compared to your universities—have a whole range of issues around not just the courses that are available and the facilities; it is what happens before, during and after as well, isn't it?

Prof. Thomas—Yes.

Senator STERLE—A previous witness said to us that one of the frustrating things she found was that critical mass is the only way you can be able to provide a range of courses, and critical mass was mentioned earlier. Do you actually sit down together and try to work out if you individually could have a greater niche in delivering certain courses that your competitor has done?

Prof. Pettigrew—We would like to, but the way in which universities have been funded for the last few decades is such that we are all in competition with each other. There are elements of cooperation and elements of collaboration—all of that sort of thing—but to be fair I think that we have all been looking after our own patch because that is the way in which the system has been run.

Prof. Rothwell—The only area I know that it has been done with some degree of success is in languages. The stark reality of it was that it was not possible to multiply the number of Japanese or Malaysian lectures—

Prof. Pettigrew—That is an operation that, I have to say, is done on an economic basis. We have a blended learning model where we are actually providing distance education language instruction from UNE in Armidale, New South Wales, at James Cook University in Cairns because they cannot afford to keep it. Together we could not afford to keep each of them but if we rationalised across the two then we could. Those courses are delivered from UNE to Cairns, but they are done on an economic basis. In other words, JCU pays us to do that and we share it economically. If there was another way of organising collaboration between universities I think you would see a whole lot of a different structure in tertiary education.

Senator STERLE—Sure, but with the challenges—as Senator O'Brien was saying and you, Professor Baker, agreed with, but I noticed that you, Professor Rothwell, did not—once you got the broadband online that is going to create far greater hurdles for you.

Prof. Thomas—One of the issues, for me, associated with that is that Senator Carr talks about hub and spoke, for example. The way that moneys are being distributed at the moment, most of the hubs will be in the Shanghai Jiao Tong club of universities. Not all of them; there will be important ones in other universities but it is difficult to get some of those started. We have had at this university—a new one that has only been going for 12 years—some very powerful world-class researches come to us who have been part of our link with a major university. That major university, when we are collaborating on a research project, spots the best researchers and makes them an offer they cannot refuse. So off they go to what has now been called the hub. So the hub and spoke is not quite as clear-cut a benefit to regional universities as it could be.

CHAIR—Thank you for your evidence.

[4.07 pm]

DALY, Ms Debra, Chair, TAFE Directors Australia

JANEK, Ms Denise, Member, TAFE Directors Australia

MCGREGOR, Mrs Elizabeth, Member, TAFE Directors Australia

MITCHELL, Mr Adrian Trevor, Member, TAFE Directors Australia

PIPER, Mr Joseph, Member, TAFE Directors Australia

SLAVIN, Mrs Susan Anne, Member, TAFE Directors Australia

WRIGHT, Mr Ronald, Member, TAFE Directors Australia

CHAIR—Welcome. I remind senators that the Senate has resolved that an officer of a department of the Commonwealth or of a state shall not be asked to give opinions on matters of policy and shall be given reasonable opportunity to refer questions asked of the officer to superior officers or to a minister. This resolution prohibits only questions asking for opinions on matters of policy and does not preclude questions asking for explanations of policies or factual questions about when and how policies were adopted. Officers of the department are also reminded that any claim that it would be contrary to the public interest to answer a question must be made by a minister and should be accompanied by a statement setting out the basis for the claim.

You have lodged a submission with the committee that we have numbered 563. Do you wish to make any alterations or amendments?

Ms Daly—No, we do not.

CHAIR—Would you like to make an opening statement.

Ms Daly—TAFE Directors Australia welcomes the opportunity to comment on issues relevant to rural and regional access to educational opportunities. TDA is the peak national body representing Australia's 58 TAFE institutes and TAFE divisions of dual-sector universities. Our association has presented a written submission to the inquiry; however, we believe that some issues relate to the specific impact of government policy decisions on particular local economies and communities. As a consequence, we have a number of representatives from TAFE institutes around Australia here today to talk about particular issues relevant to the inquiry. As an opening statement, on behalf of TDA I will make the following observations for the record.

TDA supports a greater focus on regional, rural and remote access to education and on the educational needs of rural and regional students. We believe that TAFE institutes are particularly well placed, especially in rural and regional areas, to contribute to raising education participation rates within disadvantaged groups within these communities, and indeed they have a record of

doing so. Regional and rural areas tend to have a larger proportion of communities and individuals in lower socioeconomic groups, and there is plenty of research indicating that people from these backgrounds and circumstances are less likely to complete secondary education or to progress to tertiary education.

Greater flexibility and funding support, particularly for literacy and numeracy, are required to support people to transition through barrier points—for example, in relation to Indigenous students, the transition barrier between years 10 and 11 and, in relation to the broader community within rural and regional areas, the transition barrier between year 12 and TAFE or university. We understand that details of structural adjustment funding have been advised to universities, but TDA is concerned that to date there has been little observable change in the approach of many universities in terms of initiatives which would benefit students in regional and remote areas.

In relation to financial barriers to participation, TDA has outlined issues in its written submission. However, we also highlight our concern that there are a number of different bodies at work at both the federal level and the state level at present in relation to access to, and participation in, education broadly and also in relation to improving attainment rates, most with funding attached to the initiatives. We would be concerned if there was not some overarching integration by the federal government of all of these pieces of work to ensure that there are no unintended consequences as a result of the myriad different funding sources.

TDA believes that in order to achieve the results the government is seeking, along with increased levels of flexibility to allow for different and customised solutions at a local level, there also needs to be investment in new and existing built facilities and in communication infrastructure to the benefit of communities. Finally, we are concerned that funding models at both the Commonwealth level and the state level can fail to take account of the cost of delivery of programs in rural and regional areas and that thin markets in these areas impact further on costs of delivery and can impact directly on students.

CHAIR—Thank you very much.

Senator O'BRIEN—You intimated in your submission that there were individual examples of difficulties that members of your panel here would want to address. I do not know the question to ask to get them to address them, so perhaps the best way is to say: here is your chance.

Ms Daly—I will open it up to the members.

Senator STERLE—Maybe we should start with Indigenous communities.

Mrs McGregor—The example I would like to give is based on what is possible, and inside it are some of the barriers. Today I was at a federally funded festival called Deadly Days, which is the culmination of a range of programs that we have been running for young Aboriginal people to help them stay at school and get involved in vocational education while they are at school to ensure that they have aspirations, which is the key element to success. For Aboriginal people that is intimately connected to identity. We found, in working in that aspirations and identity space, that there is nothing in the funding system that acknowledges that is a whole body of work that

needs to be done for Aboriginal people to engage with education in the first place. Through some festivals money from the Commonwealth that is not connected to the funding for the VET sector, we have been able to run this program for a second year. We have noticed as little as 20 per cent increases right up to 70 per cent increases in Indigenous kids at school choosing to stay on, go into year 11 and engage in vocational ed.

My point is that, in working particularly with Aboriginal communities, that other stuff around identity and how you build aspirations—if you accept that, and international research indicates that as well as people having options they have to have a belief that they have a right to education—has to connect to their sense of themselves and then they are right as they are on a pathway. But that is expensive work. If we think of it as an investment, what it saves us in the long term makes it valuable work. I think that whole notion of thinking about the importance of place and bringing funding sources together, instead of having sliced up programmatic one-off approaches to finding solutions, is really important.

Senator O'BRIEN—COAG is supposed to be bringing those things together for problems such as the one you are referring to. It is an interesting thing.

Mrs McGregor—We have seen it once so far, and that is with the job funds. Apart from that, the notion of place appears to be not strong in policy.

Senator O'BRIEN—Do you want to supply us with a little bit more on that?

Mrs McGregor—Yes, I would love to send you some of the data on participation and some of the results of that.

Senator STERLE—This is New South Wales based?

Mrs McGregor—Yes. We have matched it with our own resources in order to get some of this stuff happening. It is a three-year bit of funding from the federal government and then it stops.

Senator O'BRIEN—Ms Janek, have you got a comment.

Ms Janek—As to South Australia?

Senator O'BRIEN—Yes.

Ms Janek—Yes. I can give you a bit of an example about one of the things that we have been trying to do in particular, which is to get Aboriginal participation in our mainstream TAFE courses to be much greater and to get Aborigines moving through from certificate III to possibly even diplomas. Getting progression from certificate III is difficult. As for the way we have approached it, most recently we have said, 'Okay, we are going to have to put some of the money that we have for Aboriginal education into case management.' Aboriginal people going into mainstream courses often cannot cope with the teaching. We do work on teaching methodology as well, but they need support. They really need strong support. Sometimes they even need support for someone to go and get them out of bed in the morning. For some it is that sort of thing; for others it is about learning support: 'How do I approach doing this research

project?’ Unfortunately, what that has meant is this. We have put effort into getting them into higher level courses through the case management approach—and that has actually been successful and an increase is happening in our certificate III and diploma courses, and I can produce evidence of that but I do not have it here at the moment—but, because we are spending the money in that way to get the outcomes, we are not getting as much funding because we are not getting as many people just through the door. It is very difficult. We are juggling all the time. But in my view it is critical to have that extra support for these people to have success.

Mrs Slavin—I would like to reiterate Elizabeth’s mention of the slicing of funding especially in respect of the Indigenous problem. In Western Australia, as you know, we have got isolated communities with sparse populations and engaging Indigenous people in place is really critical. Sometimes with the funding being separated for schools and universities and TAFE colleges that drives very segmented approaches to engaging Indigenous people. Take, for example, the wheatbelt in which we have a town called Narrogin, which you might know of. It has got a very high suicide population rate. By and large the solutions are driven in a segmented way. It would be terrific if there were some way of having an outcomes focus with all of the institutions working together. There are obviously attempts at this, but the drivers are very much separated. I would also like to raise the issue of focus on skillsets rather than on full qualifications. In many cases getting some success based on a block of success rather than by going to a whole qualification makes much more sense with Indigenous people. This has been a very important pathway to getting success, considering the examples that I could talk about.

Ms Daly—I come from the south-eastern corner of Queensland. I can talk about what is happening in the regional areas of Queensland. You may not be aware that there are seven regional institutes of TAFE in Queensland that service a significant proportion of the Indigenous population of Queensland. We are working on a strategy to combine all of those institutes under one governance model into one regional institute that services a whole range of communities in the northern part of Queensland and to the west. What we are trying to achieve with that is to get some economies of scale and some better models of delivery across rural and remote communities. Perhaps there is scope in that model to be working with regional universities and secondary schools as well. The model is being developed now. I believe that my department will be lodging a submission with the inquiry as to some of the things that are occurring in that model. So that is the work that we are doing around the regional model in Queensland.

Mr Piper—South-west Victoria does not have a large Indigenous population. It is centred predominantly around Bridgewater and Portland and Framlingham, just north of Warrnambool. Our institute, along with other Victorian institutes, is looking at two main aspects. One is that we have established, through Skills Victoria, a number of Koorie-specific units throughout Victoria. We are also concentrating on integration and mainstreaming. We are moving away from a specific unit just dealing with Indigenous Australians but we are using it as a bridging tool to then move students into the mainstream while providing that support. I concur with Elizabeth that it is hard work. It is rewarding but it is hard work. I also concur with Elizabeth that, whilst we work predominantly on our academic input, it is more about case management. We are crossing sectors and performing tasks that one could rightfully expect other agencies to perform but it is far easier to instate a linkage within your own institute.

Mr Wright—I would like to note that today is Indigenous Literacy Day so it is very pertinent that we are talking about this topic. I would like to talk about an example from the Open

Training and Education Network distance learning part of my organisation. One of the contracts that we have, as most of the TAFE institutes have, is the language, literacy and numeracy contract with the Commonwealth with referrals from Centrelink. The contract that OTEN has is an Australia-wide contract. Its parts are unlike most of the other parts of the contracts, which are regional. Essentially, we pick up all of those people who simply cannot get to a normal TAFE facility or somewhere else to be able to undertake training at a local institute. Typically, a lot of the people that we pick up are young, Indigenous people in fairly remote areas and in rural towns: places like Kununurra in Western Australia, Hope Vale up near Cooktown, Nhulunbuy, in the Northern Territory, and Elcho Island, with the Wujal Wujal people. Think about the elements of distance education: language, literacy, numeracy and young males, often Indigenous, who are not particularly motivated. It is all a challenge logistically, technically and, most importantly, pedagogically.

I am absolutely blown away by what I see the teachers being able to achieve. But often the enablers are very simple things that require some funding, funding that is sometimes there and sometimes not there. I will give you an example. In Kununurra, in Western Australia, we work with mainly young Indigenous males who partake of our program. One of the workers at the local employment foundation, the Wunan Foundation, physically goes around in a minivan and rounds them up to bring them in. That is a critical component of the success of the program. In other areas where we do not have somebody that is able to do very simple things like that it is very easy for people to disengage or not turn up. What I am saying is that with many of the programs there is money for their delivery but not for support services. We need to have a wider perception of what support services might be required to engage those people. The outcomes can be fantastic because up in the Kimberley the jobs are there and there is a job placement foundation that is actually trying to get people up to the level whereby they can actually get those jobs.

Senator STERLE—And there are going to be a lot more jobs coming up in the next two years.

Mr Wright—That is right, with the compacts and things like that. We have other things. For example, if we send stuff by mail to one of the communities that I have just spoken about it takes six weeks for it to get there. It does not matter whether it is by express post or normal post; that is the situation. One of the communities has no electricity two days a week. We could talk about the National Broadband Network. That would provide an opportunity to jump over a lot of these limitations as long as it could be delivered in an affordable way for both the institutions and the participants.

Mr Mitchell—I am employed in western New South Wales. Previous to that I was the managing director of Kimberley TAFE for over three years. I want to highlight that during the last six years I have been associated with many Indigenous employment strategies with companies like Argyle Diamonds, in Kununurra; Aztec Resources, in Derby; the Cable Beach Resort; Bemax Resources, in western New South Wales; Barrick Gold and Manildra Flour. I would also like to highlight that all that delivery is to low student numbers. It is not at high AQF levels. It is about working very closely with industry and getting people into jobs. The challenges have been in getting the resources.

The program I want to focus on is a police recruitment program that we are currently doing with the New South Wales Police Force. This year at the New South Wales Police Academy Goulburn there are six Indigenous people participating in the university program that the academy runs. All of these students came from a program out of Dubbo in which we had 14 students and for which we secured DEEWR funding. We involved the police in the delivery of the program. It was all focused on work readiness, self-esteem, literacy, numeracy and empowering people to make decisions. It was all at the low AQF level. It is an extremely good success story. But in the next year we struggled to get funding to run it because it does not meet a lot of priorities, it is not at a high AQF level and in fact some of it involves unaccredited training. We have actually got police doing physical education training for the students. So, while we do struggle to get the funding for it, the outcomes have been very considerable. That is the type of training that we are trying to focus on.

From my own perspective, I know that we at TAFE have provided a lot of training for Aboriginal people for a number of years and you could question the success of that. While we have been involving industry and involving outcomes that are really tangible and involving community support—and we have heard stories of people driving buses to get students to courses—none of that fits into the national agenda. We have small class sizes and we do have an appearance of being expensive but the outcomes we are getting are sewing the seeds and starting to help develop role models. At Argyle Diamonds we were doing the first year of an apprenticeship under someone else's RTO ticket while running at a loss, purely to start the catalyst to develop role models within the community. Argyle Diamonds committed to making sure that 50 per cent of their workforce was Indigenous but it was a long journey. I feel that there is not recognition in the funding models, but I know the outcomes are quite significant.

I will just use a quick example. The Productivity Places Program in some jurisdictions is being rolled out at the same price in remote centres like Bourke and in Sydney. In Bourke there are no existing diploma programs running so you cannot top up. There might be one or two students out there but the students are not capable of using videoconferencing et cetera to be successful. So in some jurisdictions we are operating under the same pricing regime as large centres, where theoretically you might have 30 people out in a workplace that is relatively close, or you have existing classes running, which you can top up.

So although we do contribute very much to the national agenda I do not think there is the recognition that delivering Cert 2 in regional and remote Australia can get people into jobs and start developing role models or empowering people to make decisions, which is not the traditional pathway which the policy focuses on.

Senator O'BRIEN—Thank you for that. At least we have started on this issue. My original intention was not to limit you to one field but—

Senator BACK—Senator Sterle high-jacked him!

Senator O'BRIEN—do you want to ask another question, Senator Sterle?

Senator STERLE—I do. I am taking my turn now! Mr Mitchell, were you instrumental with Rio Tinto, through Argyle Diamond Mines, in implementing that 50 per cent Indigenous workforce?

Mr Mitchell—Yes. When I went to the Kimberley there was a complex arrangement. They were exploring the idea of going underground, which was a first for Rio Tinto, to follow the pink diamond—whatever the technical term is.

Senator STERLE—I flew over it about a month ago.

Mr Mitchell—That was a big commitment. They were looking to seek release from significant royalty imposts, I understand, but the company was very committed to the triple bottom line. Their spend in Kununurra I think at the time was \$2 million, and they quickly ramped that up to \$21 million within a short period of time. So they were really keen on making a difference to the local community. That was the opportunity we needed to bring about significant change, in (1) the types of programs we were running, and (2) the outcomes. It is quite coincidental, because I did not know that Mr Wright was involved with the Wunan Foundation, but they were key players in supporting the students. The outcomes are just outstanding for creating role models for the school, and leveraging off that to say, ‘Look, you can be part of that!’ We were putting in place great programs for the school, aligned to people moving into Argyle Diamonds.

Senator STERLE—Let me tell you, then: you deserve an AO and it is our loss that New South Wales has now got you.

CHAIR—It is our gain.

Senator STERLE—I have a vested interest in the top of the West because I have been working up there for years. I also wanted to say that I think there are some unsung heroes at TAFE. People are very quick to jump on TAFE’s case and give you a wack around the ears but I think you do a fantastic job. But when you are delivering specific training to meet the needs of those communities, that is what we should be putting on a pedestal up front.

Mrs Slavin, we do not want to leave you out of the equation, because you are a Western Aussie. In Imintji on the Gibb River—you would probably be aware of this, Mr Mitchell, and I hope you are Mrs Slavin—there is a gentleman who is running a wonderful program.

Mrs Slavin—Indeed.

Senator STERLE—He has his own siren and he gets those young Indigenous males out of bed and teaches them life skills, through TAFE, that are essential to their community. There are so many Aboriginal boys who are well and truly trained but do not get to use those skills. That is another classic example. Would you like to tell the committee a bit more about what else is going on up there?

Mrs Slavin—Before I get onto Clontarf, which I assume you are talking about—

Senator STERLE—No, I am not. I am talking about the area out of Derby.

Mrs Slavin—Sorry, I am not so familiar with that but I wonder if I might say something about something else. Adrian was a terrific MD in Western Australia and we do miss him, but the current MD who is in the Kimberley asked me to raise the point that there are cross policies from

other sections that have a huge impact. For example, she mentioned that the safe housing for young Indigenous Australians, which was announced as a federal and state initiative, is a really important opportunity to allow young Indigenous people to remain in the region and to attend. There is this integration of policy that we are so dependent on, because these people will not travel—they cannot afford to and have community responsibilities and the like that would forbid that.

I am not familiar with the Derby example. I am familiar with Clontarf because we are in the processing of duplicating that at my own TAFE college, where we are aligning with the West Coast Eagles and Wirrpanda Foundation to provide mentors. I do not know if that is part of the Derby example but having Indigenous mentors as part of the program keeps those young people in the place of study, which is really difficult. It hits and gets through those barriers. Again, this funding is currently not covered. We have to rely on volunteers and role models in the community to do that.

Senator STERLE—And, importantly, it is keeping young Indigenous males on their traditional lands.

Mrs Slavin—And at age 13, of course, they are considered to be men. This is where that school-TAFE thing is so important. If all their money is being decided in schools, such as in the Narrogin high school, those young people do not necessarily align themselves with that community.

Senator STERLE—That is right. I will leave this and go back to Senator O'Brien. Sorry, Chair. But the Imintji example out of Derby is a classic. Last time I was up there, those young men had proudly tendered on a job up at Kandiwal, some 500 kilometres north, where they were going up to do work, proper paid jobs, for that community with the skills that they had learned—fencing, welding and the like—out of the TAFE system.

Mrs McGregor—One of the critical things that Adrian identified is the role of industry. One of our challenges—and my colleagues were talking about this earlier this afternoon—is that typically, in regions, about 95 per cent of our enterprises are tiny and they do not have the capacity of organisations like Argyle to get behind some of these initiatives. That is where often the beginning point needs to be some simulated environments or social enterprise. There is a whole other set of issues around small business that are really pertinent and require a whole different set of solutions.

Ms Janek—In South Australia for the last two years we have had a really successful program mainly supported by OneSteel, Whyalla, called Goal 100. They were looking for 100 jobs for operators in the steelworks. In the first program that we ran, 80 people got jobs. Thirty per cent of those were Indigenous—they prefer to be called Aboriginal in South Australia. That was fantastic, but we have got a boom-bust cycle in the larger enterprises. Ausminerals are also giving people jobs, or were. Suddenly, with the financial crisis, everyone has backed off. OneSteel have actually let people go. That has been really unfortunate. We really have to get a better small business strategy. That means more input, and it is harder to do that.

CHAIR—Senator Sterle, I actually meant to go to you first this time, so if you want to ask another couple of questions, please do.

Senator STERLE—If I can talk about Western Australia and Indigenous education or Indigenous benefits, I will go all day! And in WA they prefer to be called Aboriginal too. A previous witness provided us with some numeracy benchmarks, looking at years 3, 5 and 7. To cut a long story short, the information showed how, the further the children in years 3, 5 and 7 got from the city, the lower their scores were. The areas were classified as metropolitan, provincial, remote and very remote. Those of us who deal with the larger states know that there is not a lot of difference between remote and very remote. The figures get worse and worse. This is not new to you. These were MCEETYA figures. Do you notice the same flow-on effect when it comes to tertiary students entering TAFEs? Is the standard or the literacy a lot lower than in the city?

Mrs Slavin—I do not experience it, so I cannot comment on that in detail. My understanding is that that is the case, but I cannot comment on that.

Ms Janek—I will just comment, and I can certainly find some evidence later for you if you would like. Certainly it is our experience—and I have worked in both city TAFEs and, for the last five years, regional TAFEs—that we have a lot more issues with literacy and numeracy, and that we need to give a lot more support to people in the mainstream. I talked about the Aboriginal case-management approach, where we are giving learning support to Aboriginal students in the mainstream courses, but we have to do that for a whole heap of our students, not just the Aboriginal students. We have now started working with our literacy and numeracy practitioners, trying to integrate some of their work with that of the mainstream lecturers, so that, within the context of vocational training, the students are getting support for their literacy and numeracy at the time they are actually having to deal with it for their vocational training. That is the best model we can use. But, again, it is a more expensive model. So we do it where we can, and we do not where we cannot.

Mrs McGregor—It is certainly the case that educational levels per se in our region are a couple of percentage points lower than those in city areas. That, I think, is from generations of people not only not having access but also not seeing education as a critical path to life choices. So I think we have that two-pronged challenge: (1) to work around aspirations, and (2) to make sure that the options are there. And that may be true in all the regions.

Ms Daly—I would make the comment that, in the Gold Coast, which is Australia's sixth largest city, we do have challenges with literacy and numeracy rates, from school leavers but from adult learners as well. I cannot tell you if that is any worse in remote or regional areas. But I do know that it presents a whole lot of challenges around successful completion of study when students start on the back foot, with literacy and numeracy problems.

In our system in Queensland, we pre-test new students with a standardised literacy and numeracy test, and if they fail that literacy and numeracy test we make an offer of literacy and numeracy support. But the student is under no obligation to take that offer up and, in fact, we find that, in many cases, they do not take it up because they feel as though they are being marginalised and they do not want to admit that there is a problem. But then there is a problem, further downstream, when they do not actually finish their course.

Senator STERLE—Yes, there is a stigma, isn't there?

Ms Daly—There is a stigma, yes.

Mr Wright—Whilst I would not dispute what my colleagues have said, I think we need to be very careful that we do not just characterise literacy and numeracy simply by distance away from major centres or anything like that. I can give you examples from my own area of Western Sydney, around Mount Druitt and so on. There are 13 suburbs around Mount Druitt which have—

Senator STERLE—That was mentioned—well, they did not actually mention Mount Druitt but Western Sydney. I am sorry to cut you off.

Mr Wright—That is right—where we have some very, very significant literacy and numeracy problems. There are high numbers of refugees who are not literate in their own language, let alone in a new language, English, when they come here, and who have had no formal schooling in their own country, in the Sudan and places like that. Yet, five or 10 kilometres away, in places like Baulkham Hills and Castle Hill, we have very high levels of literacy and numeracy. And I am sure the same would apply if you were to go to a country town like Armidale. So I think that we just need to be very careful. I think what happens is that, because you have more disadvantaged communities in regional areas, when you do the averages you probably get a few percentage points lower.

Senator STERLE—I could not agree with you more, when you start talking about agricultural areas versus mining areas, and I am sure those figures would reflect that.

Mr Piper—If I could, I would like to draw your attention, on that question, to aspirations. The aspirations of a community, or those young people in a community, are often linked to the experiences in their own home. In the 2006 census for the Barwon region, which covers from Geelong in Victoria all way through to the South Australian border, 45 per cent of 44- to 64-year-olds were found to have no formal qualifications post secondary school, and many of those did not do year 12. It is 30 per cent for 20- to 44-year-olds. To link that to your question about literacy and numeracy, often young people will suffer, through a lack of aspiration to go on to tertiary education, because they have no guidance. They have no mentors in their homes. We are working diligently with secondary colleges right across the institute. Our institute has relationships with 42 different secondary colleges, where over a thousand students are combining year 10 and 11 with vocational education and training. We are doing work in literacy and numeracy at that level. A lot of people have fallen through the gaps. We have our own literacy and numeracy unit at our institute which identifies those students discreetly. As Deb said, you have to be careful about it. We work with them not only in the institute but in the workplace so as to improve their literacy and numeracy. With that lack of qualifications within the regions it is very clear that many of the young people coming through do not have aspirations to drive them to a literacy and numeracy level that is going to take them forward because they do not have peer support.

Senator STERLE—That is why there is a fantastic push for structured workplace learning. I am one of the biggest supporters of that.

Senator BACK—On the second page of your submission you talk about basic skills. You come up with what I thought was quite an interesting observation:

A direct allocation of funds to TAFE Institutes with campuses and services in rural and remote areas could significantly accelerate increases in the tertiary participation and success rates of students from the poorest Australian communities.

I wonder if someone could explain that. Do I learn from that that the system is receiving funding but hiving it off so that it is not getting to regional, rural and remote areas? Am I interpreting that incorrectly?

Ms Daly—I do not think that is the right interpretation. TAFE institutes are funded by the states. Federal money comes through the state Treasury to TAFE institutes. What I think that summary is suggesting is that if there were a direct allocation of additional funding to TAFE institutes with campuses and services in regional and remote areas, we would be able to do some of the work that people in my party have already alluded to around additional literacy and numeracy support, self-esteem support and some of the non-accredited training that will improve outcomes for people in remote and regional communities and put them on a pathway to further education. Would anyone like to add to that? That is my interpretation of that summary.

Mr Piper—We are talking about 2.1 and also 2.2 in our submission, which go to academic conceptual skills. We are talking about structural adjustment funding. We operate in a nationally accredited system. We are governed by a national quality framework. Whether a student leaves a college in WA or Queensland, we are compelled under our own state jurisdictions and nationally to recognise that qualification.

Senator BACK—That is correct.

Mr Piper—Depending on our jurisdiction, we link vocational education and training through the secondary school system. Our VET qualifications are even recognised in some jurisdictions for university entrance scores. But we run into a wall, and the wall that we run into is building aspirations and planning by families when we cannot guarantee articulation arrangements into the university sector. It is left to individual institutes to directly negotiate with various universities on what credits will be given, what articulation arrangements will be made, when we operate as one under a national system. So that arrangement, to us—

Senator BACK—It is not seamless.

Mr Piper—It is not seamless and the planning process make it very difficult to work with the family aspirations and those of our communities. I draw your attention to a scenario that we as CEOs of TAFEs face every day. When we work with students we try to give them a year 8 and to work predominantly with their parents and their peers to give them guidance on a career path. We can guarantee them a pathway of recognise credits and a place in TAFE, and they can be tremendously successful, but they have no guarantee of a place at university or even that credits will be given for the competencies that they have achieved.

Ms Daly—That the AQF suggests should be there.

Mr Piper—That is one of the issues that has been put in our paper. As a TAFE sector we believe we could provide a better outcome for the funds that are already provided, that we could work with the university sector but do so in a holistic manner that provides for a common understanding and therefore a common planning process.

Senator BACK—Do you think that is something this committee could pick up in its recommendations? You have used the term ‘hit the wall’. Is that an area that you think we could pick up on and reinforce, if we were so minded?

Mr Piper—If the committee were so minded, I think it would be a great step forward, particularly for students in rural and regional Australia. I am sure the committee has heard from many presenters about the cost of leaving a rural environment to go to a larger metropolitan environment to continue tertiary education. Our work and the work of the Local Learning and Employment Networks in Victoria that have presented to your committee indicate it is about \$22,000 a year without the tertiary fee.

Senator BACK—That is correct.

Mr Piper—We believe as regional institutes that we should be doing the foundation work. There is no logical reason why the TAFE institutes, which have well over 100 campuses across Australia, are not providing the foundation years for many of the university courses. If we do so in cooperation with our university sector it would allow students one or two further years in their community. They are no longer 18 but 20 or 21 and more mature. They have had the opportunity to be kept within the family unit and then they can finish their studies in an appropriate university within a metropolitan area.

Senator BACK—At a time perhaps when their maturity levels will make the separation a little bit easier for them.

Mr Piper—Exactly, Senator. Thank you.

Mrs McGregor—The second element that is implied there is that the direct allocation refers to the structural adjustment funds. What we have noticed, and it has certainly happened in my region, is that the structural adjustment funds at the moment are funnelled primarily through individual universities. We have a situation in one of our towns at the moment where there are four different universities talking either to us or to local government about provision in relation to health. That is great, except that they are not necessarily talking to each other, and no-one is talking to us about information technology or business or whatever. So we would argue that if the structural adjustment funds were available either to the TAFE sector or to local government, what you would get is the perspective of the community: ‘These are the qualifications we need in our town for our economy.’ Then we work with the community and the business people who can help young people to aspire to those qualifications and we potentially have a range of universities with different capabilities working together with us and local government to provide solutions, as opposed to the behaviour we are getting at the moment, which the system drives, which is a single university thinking about its mission and what it wants to do in town.

We have opened up invitations to a range of universities to have a discussion around that. They are keen, but there are going to be no resources that we can bring to the table to say, ‘Let’s take it beyond an idea.’ I think that the mention of a structural adjustment fund is part of a potential direct allocation to institutes to work with a range of universities to meet the needs of various communities across our region. It would be different in different parts of each institute. You would not have a one-size-fits-all, which is critical.

CHAIR—We have time for one more question, but I flag that we are going to be travelling around and doing other states; so, if you feel it would be useful—as I am sure we would, because I think we have only scratched the surface—to take the opportunity to appear again at those other hearings, please flag it. I think it would be very useful.

Ms Daly—I make one tiny extra point about the qualifications. Senator Back, you might be interested to know that there is research done between Griffith University and TAFEs in their catchment area to suggest that students who take a VEC pathway to university have very high completion rates and high success rates. That has been one of the drivers behind Griffith University working actively with all of the TAFE institutes in their catchment area.

Senator BACK—I concur and am most interested to hear that. Picking up on your comment, Ms McGregor, I think that the corporate sector would be very willing to lend its support, Mr Piper, to the type of concept you are speaking about. Companies like BHP are doing work with the Newman high school and TAFE with the mining alliance program. Rio Tinto is, as you and Senator Sterle have mentioned. I detect quite a degree of frustration, when I speak to my colleagues who are in those sectors that are supporting training, that it is not translating seamlessly, and they want it to do so. I do not have a question but simply reinforce that I would not ignore the influence of the corporate sector in their representations to the universities.

CHAIR—I thank you all very much for appearing today. It has been extremely useful. We would be very keen to talk further through this process. That would be tremendous.

Committee adjourned at 4.57 pm