



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

# Official Committee Hansard

## SENATE

RURAL AND REGIONAL AFFAIRS AND TRANSPORT  
REFERENCES COMMITTEE

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

MONDAY, 21 SEPTEMBER 2009

PERTH

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE



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## SENATE RURAL AND REGIONAL AFFAIRS AND TRANSPORT

### REFERENCES COMMITTEE

Monday, 21 September 2009

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

**Substitute members:** Senators Adams and Hanson-Young

**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, 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 Adams, Nash, O'Brien, Siewert 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 8.51 am****HAVEL, Dr Peter, Principal, Albany Senior High School****HOSKIN, Mr Jonathan Eric, Principal, Mount Barker Community College***Evidence was taken via videoconference—*

**CHAIR (Senator Nash)**—I declare open this public hearing of the Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee. The committee is hearing evidence in the 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 the proceedings will be 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 then 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 that is claimed. If the committee determines to insist on an answer, a 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 also ask witnesses to remain behind for a few minutes at the conclusion of their evidence in case the Hansard staff need to clarify any terms or references. I remind people in the hearing room to ensure 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.

Gentlemen, before I welcome you, this is a first for us. This is the first time we have done videoconference, so please bear with us if there are any hiccups along the way. 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 them to superior officers or to a minister. This resolution prohibits questions asking for opinions on matters of policy only 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. Gentlemen, do you have anything you wish to add to the manner in which you appear today?

**Dr Havel**—I am here as an individual and as a principal.

**Mr Hoskin**—I am here as principal of the college but also I have direct experience, through both my children going through the government system and going to university.

**CHAIR**—Thank you very much. Would you like to make an opening statement before we move to questions?

**Dr Havel**—Yes, I would. I would like to make some overarching statements and then focus on the disadvantage to country regions. I would assume that tertiary studies were linked to our capacity as a country to create wealth and that we needed people not just in the trades but as engineers, scientists, lawyers, doctors et cetera. Regional areas need these people as well. We need those students that leave here to return. Rural wealth generation relies on innovation and independent thinking. Our education system does produce such people, but the country needs to value this and give students access to tertiary studies. To me, the Youth Allowance needs to be targeted towards individuals and to giving them the opportunity to better themselves through university study. If a young adult is 18 years of age and has the right to vote in a legal sense and is independent of their parents, I see an overarching problem with them being penalised according to their parents' income.

As Jonathan said, my kids went through university and we had to return to Perth for them to train after I had been posted to the country as a teacher. We were not poor, but we could not afford for our kids to stay in hostels, to get another house or to pay rent in Perth. If we choose to have a Youth Allowance and make it difficult to get it then we will create inequity, especially for country students. Firstly, students can travel to Perth or stay in Albany for tertiary studies. There are courses at UWA and Curtin offered in Albany but only for a limited time—that is, for first-year university equivalent. They may delay the inevitable for one or two years for a small range of students but in essence they have no real choice but to travel to Perth to engage in tertiary studies. Travelling to Perth brings costs to most parents, not just the poor, that are not easy to meet. The reality is that many students take a gap year to access Youth Allowance. In fact, 80 per cent of Albany students take a gap year. If they take a gap year and try to get the Youth Allowance then their parents still face the cost of supporting them when they move to Perth because of the limited value of the Youth Allowance. Possible costs, as you know, are rent, food and entertainment.

Many scholarships require students to continue their tertiary studies immediately. Even with a scholarship, many students cannot afford to stay in Perth without parental help. Hence they need to be seen as independent. Most of them have to turn those scholarships down because they do not have the means to take them up. Whether or not we say they are independent, tertiary students are confronted with all the freedoms that are associated with their age and they do not have the immediate support and guidance of their families when they go to Perth. They need to cook for themselves and decide on their entertainment, sport and friends and they are involved in developing new personal relationships. They do all this without their parents present. So they go from a very controlled environment to all of a sudden a very free one. We are well aware of the positives and negatives of this.

Having a Youth Allowance that is dependent on a gap year creates other problems. In Albany there is a lack of opportunities for employment to meet the threshold funds to gain that independence, and the new rules will mean that many students will have to work for two years. By that time, they may lose their passion for tertiary study and it will make it harder for them to get to university. I think fewer will go. If a person gains short-term employment just to get this independent status then they inflate the skills and qualifications of those who would normally do other jobs—like working for Target. Those types of jobs will be taken by these students.



In summary, tertiary studies are engaged in by individuals that our society classifies as independent on measures such as the right to vote and engaging in national service. If they are independent, they need to be supported whilst they complete tertiary studies. Such studies are of great benefit to our country and true wealth generation. The Youth Allowance is small in real terms and individuals still have to pay for their education through HECS. They ultimately are independent and are paying for their studies. When you means test Youth Allowance, you create an equity issue for young people who want to be independent from their parents. Changing the rules will create real issues for country students and make it very difficult to access studies in Perth. Thank you.

**CHAIR**—Thank you very much, Dr Havel. Mr Hoskin, would you like to add some comments?

**Mr Hoskin**—To give you some background, Mount Barker is a smaller regional centre. It is about 50 kilometres north of Albany. We are a single secondary college within the town, with kindergarten through to year 12. Our students come a considerable distance—that is, about 70 kilometres each way east-west and about 35 kilometres north-south. Buses therefore are essential. We do not have a hostel in town, although that is something we are working towards. We have had excellent results with our students going on to tertiary studies and also to VET and apprenticeships and so on. Last year some 90 per cent of our students going on to university opted to take a gap year and are currently working towards that. My evidence is a bit broader than Peter's.

Firstly, I would like to say something about bus services. I contrast the treatment of students going to government schools with those going to private schools. In my example, we have students who are able to elect to go to a private school in Albany and get a bus from further north of us and further west of us and then past us to Albany. But the students who elect to come to us are not provided with a bus service. That to me is completely inequitable. Our results are at least as good as those of private schools in Albany, yet students are not able to access us from Albany or from further afield if they choose to do that. They are able to get a bus to a private school but not to a government school. That seems to me inequitable.

Secondly, our college is trying to provide what we call a full-service model. That is to say that it is not just about education; it is about providing what rural and regional students particularly need in support—that is, physical health services, psychological services, guidance, therapy and so on. Therefore, providing within the college facilities that allow those health, juvenile justice and police services and so on to have a home is really important. The only way we have been able to do that is through the government education system providing rooms and facilities for those people to come on board. I understand that is the way governments work in these nice little silos. That for me is not an efficient use of public money.

One other thing that concerns me is the breadth of the secondary curriculum. As a smaller school—we only have some 350 students in the high school part of the college—maintaining a decent number of subjects for both tertiary and vocational education is really important. In Albany we are doing something to collaborate between the schools, but all that is predicated on having good broadband services. Although the facility we have this morning is okay, you would appreciate that the quality is not all that good. National broadband is therefore for regional schools very important. When I was thinking about today, I wanted to really contrast what we do

in terms of looking at improved education. At the moment the focus is on New York and places like that. However, if you look at the figures, the schools that are doing the best and that have made the most improvement are in places like Korea. Korea will have 10 times the speed we will have with our broadband system two or three years earlier than us. I say that obviously assuming that the broadband network goes ahead as planned. Technology in the classroom, for collaboration between schools, is absolutely vital. At the moment, the quality and the speed are just not there.

Peter made some really good points about tertiary access. I will just make a couple of extra points. The first one is that we have a really good UWA Albany centre here, as well as UWA in Perth. I noticed that in the latest documentation that No. 1, the number of HECS places, is increasing very slowly. There is the issue of HECS places for regional universities. There is very slow growth. The second one is that the TER requirements for the Albany centre are now the same as for the city. Rural students tend to get five per cent or five-plus per cent lower scores just because they are rural students, not because they are less intelligent. They are not getting any extra access by the fact that there is the Albany centre here.

The costs that Peter talked about are absolutely true in relation to HECS—plus college fees, plus living expenses, plus rent. Certainly for students at Mount Barker, the living away from home allowance is absolutely critical to them being able to go. I spoke to our deputy head girl who is working in Albany currently before her university course in psychology next year. She was simply shaking her head and saying, ‘If these changes go through, I will simply not go.’ That is something that is obviously of great concern to me.

The college council have written to the minister indicating their real concern with the changes to the living away from home allowance. While the grants that are now available for \$4,000 and \$2,000 are helpful, they are not the basis on which students will want to plan for the future. Once our students from Mount Barker, and I believe from Albany as well, get to university from the government schools the retention is very good. In terms of government money, it is excellent value for money. Obviously there is financial hardship for our students going to Perth.

The other point I would like to make is that it is really interesting that very few students go interstate to attend university. I think that is an indication of the same issue. The feeling from our last year’s students is that girls particularly would be discriminated against by the changes.

**CHAIR**—Thank you very much. Senator O’Brien is here with me. We are just waiting on Senator Adams and Senator Sterle who have been delayed. Senator Adams is walking into the room as I speak. Before I pass to Senator O’Brien, could you give the committee the populations of both Albany and Mount Barker.

**Mr Hoskin**—The population of Albany is about 33,000. That includes the shire and the city. The population of Mount Barker is about 5,000.

**CHAIR**—Thank you very much for those opening statements.

**Senator O’Brien**—Gentleman, I presume you are aware of the changes that have been announced in relation to gap year students this year?

**Dr Havel**—Yes, I am aware of the changes. I have them here.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—Those who need to travel away from home will still be eligible for the benefits available, complying with the earning—I have forgotten the precise wording—

**Mr Hoskin**—It is really difficult to hear you, Senator.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—I am speaking as close to the microphone as I can. Can you hear that?

**Mr Hoskin**—Only just.

**Dr Havel**—Barely.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—Is that better? I do not know what else I can do.

**Mr Hoskin**—A little better, yes—thank you. There are changes for this year from what was originally proposed, but there are no changes for next year. Is that what you are saying?

**Senator O'BRIEN**—I was just asking whether you are aware of the ones for this year, given that it suggested to me in your evidence that there are people who are on a gap year this year who thought they might not go if the system did not change, but indeed it will change for those students, won't it?

**Dr Havel**—For one year, we understand, until mid next year.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—That is right. Are you aware of the impact on students in the region who will no longer have to take a gap year but will qualify because of the increased parental income thresholds?

**Mr Hoskin**—Yes. It will not apply to many of our students. The vast majority will not be covered by that.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—What is the average parental income that are we talking about for the students that you are talking about?

**Dr Havel**—We would consider it the middle of the road. Albany Senior High School has an FTI of around \$100,000. So we will have some wealthy families but, on the whole, there is a considerable number who would not be considered wealthy or, probably, middle-class.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—What is the availability of work in the region for young people to accumulate \$19,000-odd between the time they finish year 12 and, after a gap year, the time they commence university?

**Mr Hoskin**—It is certainly very possible, Senator. Until this year there have been good employment prospects and most students have been able to do that. Often they take more than one job to be able to do that, and the rates of pay may not be very high. But the number of hours they are prepared to work is certainly quite significant. So they are prepared to work very, very hard to do that. One of the issues clearly is the gap between when they go off to university,

which is typically at the end of February, and the start of the payment of the allowance—which, even under the old system which is being continued for an extra year, does not cut in until the middle of May, probably about the 10th or 12th of May. So they have got that three-month period. In my own case, we simply paid upfront for those fees for our son and our daughter when they first went to university. We were able to do that, but obviously there are other students who are not able to do that.

**Dr Havel**—With my own children, I chose to go Perth. I resigned my position as a principal in the country regions and supported my children through university in Perth. On their completion I took a position back with the government and came to Albany. I had to terminate my career halfway through it.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—In terms of the system that is proposed, are you saying you would rather the thresholds be lower but that students could qualify by taking a gap year and earning a certain amount of income?

**Dr Havel**—As I said in my statement, I believe in the issue of 'independent' and a definition of that. If you are an 18-year-old and you want to study, you are a young adult in our society and if you value tertiary education I think we should support it, and they are paying HECS. So I have to pay for their tertiary studies, in essence. So why penalise those individuals according to what their parents earn?

**Senator O'BRIEN**—Are you saying that that should be the case whether the student needs to leave home or not?

**Dr Havel**—I am saying that basically if you are going to have a youth allowance to support them to study it should be something that we provide to people, like a scholarship.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—Given that under the current system prior to the change of legislation, if it does change, that is not available, you are suggesting that you are not satisfied with the previous system either and you would rather a much more comprehensive Austudy youth allowance payment.

**Dr Havel**—Yes, but if I am speaking for the students at my school, if they can get independence—especially many of the staff who have students just about to go to university, they were outraged by this change and they wanted to have access to general independent youth allowance.

**Mr Hoskin**—For the students at Mount Barker it is pretty clear that the changes that were proposed, that have obviously been put on hold, those changes will disadvantage our students, and the number of students that would benefit is much less than the number of students that will be made worse off and few will probably arguably not end up going to university.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—The information that I have is that about 100,000 students would be better off and about 25,000 students would be worse off. You suggest that Albany is disproportionately representing the latter category.

**Mr Hoskin**—I do not know what those figures mean in terms of country students. Obviously we are concerned about students in the country who are already significantly disadvantaged compared with their city counterparts, and I think that the evidence from parents and also from staff and from students is that they all believe that the changes will make them significantly worse off and it will be a significant drag to the possibility that they will ever get to university.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—So you are not aware of anyone in your community who would be better off with the changes and would be able to undertake university without a gap year?

**Mr Hoskin**—No-one has said that to me.

**Dr Havel**—We have always had a students who will go straight on without a gap year, and generally their parents are able to pay.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—But what I am asking about is: with the raised parental income thresholds, you are not aware of any students who would be better off and would be able to go straight to university without a gap year because of the changes?

**Dr Havel**—I am only aware of those who have made issues of the changes. I have not got access to every student who is out there to make that decision.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—That is fair enough. I am not being critical. I am just trying to find out the nature of the complaints that have been raised and the nature of other information that has been raised with you.

**Dr Havel**—We are only aware of those people who have come to see us, and they are generally the ones who are not affected. The ones who could go straight on or win a scholarship will do that. Generally they are the ones with parents who can support them. Every year, there are always a few of those.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—I am sure that is the case. Do you know how many students would be becoming the second member of the family to have to travel to university? Are there many of those?

**Mr Hoskin**—Yes, there are. In Mount Barker, I would say probably around 30 to 50 per cent would be the second person, which would be similar to most regional communities.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—Are those people aware that, where there is a second student participating, the income thresholds are a lot higher?

**Mr Hoskin**—That is true; I think people are aware of that. But what students are saying is that that does not make any difference to them. Both Peter and I are saying that 80 to 90 per cent of students take a gap year, and their reason for taking a gap year is to become independent of their parents financially. If you take that away that is going to be a significant issue.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—I suggest to you that your own evidence suggests that they do not really become independent anyway, because they cannot live on Youth Allowance and what they have earned does not make them independent. They depend on their parents anyway.

**Mr Hoskin**—That is not correct at all. The majority of students that I speak with, and certainly my own children, receive the Youth Allowance and plus they work. Those things enable them to be financially independent. I know the aim of many students in Mount Barker, even from quite wealthy families, is to be independent of their parents, and their parents want them to be independent for the life experience.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—I am not sure what you mean by saying they arrange to be independent. Do you mean they arrange to earn the income to get the benefit? I am not sure what you mean.

**Mr Hoskin**—What I am saying is that students are looking to be independent of their parents and they are enabled by a combination of Youth Allowance and what they earn in bars or wherever they work while they are at university to get enough money to cover their time away in the city. It is that contrast between city parents who have the ability to keep their children at home and people in the country who do not have that ability that is the concern.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—So we should limit the benefits to those who leave home?

**Mr Hoskin**—I am just concerned about the students in the country.

**Dr Havel**—That is why I raised the issue of the notion of independence.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—I understand that. I am just trying to get a feeling for this given that the benefits are available on a lower parental income threshold to students who remain at home and are therefore independent, rather than—

**Mr Hoskin**—They are not independent of their parents, are they?

**Senator O'BRIEN**—No, but they still get a benefit at a lower income threshold.

**Mr Hoskin**—Eighty to 90 per cent of them want to be independent, and we are agreeing that that is a good thing. The proposal would obviously take that away.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—On another subject, how is the availability of university degrees taken remotely by correspondence or the like affecting young people in Albany and Mount Barker?

**Dr Havel**—We are looking at online learning down here in significant ways to overcome the disadvantage of living in rural and remote areas. One of the things we know is that we will always consider that secondary to face-to-face contact in learning. Even the access to UWA in Albany is only for the first or second year of a degree, and it is for a limited range of degrees. You have to travel to Perth for degrees in things like medicine or full-blown engineering. Ultimately, there is an issue of independence in going to Perth to pursue individual careers.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—I understand that many degrees are not available remotely or at regional campuses. Should there be a means to obtaining the basis of degrees regionally with the specialisation to come maybe at the principal universities in the cities? Is that something that more work should be done on?

**Dr Havel**—Yes, that is what I was suggesting. They could do that and I am supportive of that. It would open the window for somebody to work for two years down here before they go.

**Mr Hoskin**—It is also a matter of choice. It is great to provide another opportunity. For example, students in Albany might access La Trobe University. But it is that choice. If what you are saying is that we should force students in regional areas to stay in regional areas and to use a service that is not as ideal as face-to-face contact, that is not something I would support.

**Senator ADAMS**—Sorry I was late, gentlemen. I have lived in Kojaneerup for a number of years and educated both of my sons from there, putting them through Muresk. Would you explain the practicality of the change whereby we have to have 30 hours per week of work rather than some of the farming students earning their money with harvest and with seeding or working in Mount Barker, for instance, with the plantations and the grapevines.

**Dr Havel**—Often, as I did, students do seasonal work or go to the mines, and they can earn a great amount of money in a short period of time. But, when you enforce those long hours and they have to have employment and wages for a greater period of time, yes, it not only disadvantages the students; when they engage in that sort of work they take that work away from people who are not intending to go to university, and that may be their income and livelihood.

**Mr Hoskin**—As well as seeding in Mount Barker, they would work in places like abattoirs, vineyards and so on, all of which is seasonal. A combination of those over a period of a year will get you to the total that you are looking for. With the 30 hours, though, if there are a few weeks or perhaps a month or two during that time when they do not do that 30 hours, that is going to significantly impact. My own children and children in year 12 this year and last year are all in that situation of working seasonally to get up to that total.

**Senator ADAMS**—Also, with rental accommodation in Perth being at a premium, how are your students that do become independent coping?

**Dr Havel**—A lot of people who contact us have multiple people in one house and then parents have to support that. Having maybe five or six young people all in one house is not necessarily a conducive environment for learning, whereas when you have your own home and your parents are supportive of you studying, that would disadvantage anybody who has to go and find rental accommodation in Perth with the high rental costs. Especially around UWA and areas like Nedlands—the really wealthy places—the rental costs are high. People know the students need those rentals and obviously they take advantage of it as well.

**Senator ADAMS**—Are you seeing many families moving to Perth from out of the area to support their children while they go to university?

**Dr Havel**—Yes, including one of the members of my staff. As soon as his kids graduated and had to go to Perth, he rented out his house down here and transferred from my school to Perth. It is not what he wants to do, but it is something he has done because of the nature of the system.

**Mr Hoskin**—And it is a combination of not only the financial issue but also the provision of support for your children. There are both of those aspects, but many students want to be financially independent of their parents. Obviously, going and living in a shared house is an

important part of that. There are many shared houses that students pass on from one generation to the next—they are aware of previous students from Mount Barker or Albany that have had those houses. By sharing four or five to a house, they are able to get the rents to a reasonable level. At the moment, students are able to make ends meet if they have got the living-away-from-home allowance, plus they are doing two evenings, or perhaps a full day of work, to supplement their income. They are not able to be well off, but they are able to manage if they do that.

**Senator ADAMS**—On the demise of the Great Southern plantations and the amount of work that was available in the area, do you see any change there?

**Dr Havel**—Yes, I do. We have also had the closure of the mine out at Ravensthorpe. We have seen a considerable decline in that sort of work around Albany, and it is only filtering through this year.

**Senator ADAMS**—On young people getting jobs in the future, they might be right for this year, but what do you see for next year?

**Mr Hoskin**—I would say that it is still going to be possible. I think the point you made earlier about the 30 hours a week is a significant one because most of the work they are going to be able to get will be of a seasonal nature. Whether it is the renaissance of timber or going and working on the bins for CBH, all of those things are going to be jobs where that hour limit is going to be critical. Changing the current system is definitely going to militate against country students.

**Senator ADAMS**—What do you see as the solution to the problem?

**Dr Havel**—I have already put on the table that, if we do not have something that benefits students as individuals and independents—and they are already being taxed in a sense to complete their degrees or take loans and that sort of thing—if we increase the disincentive for people to engage in tertiary studies, especially when these sort of people can go to the mines in Western Australia and get considerable wages without tertiary study, we are going to see fewer and fewer people engaging in tertiary studies. At the moment, I have a daughter and a son-in-law who are doctors—they have nearly graduated. When I see what they have to put up with in terms of jobs and wages compared to somebody who is totally untrained, what is the incentive for them to spend six years studying? What is the incentive for somebody to do engineering? We face a shortage of teachers who are properly qualified in maths, the sciences and those sorts of areas. Why would someone look at tertiary studies when there is such a high cost?

**Mr Hoskin**—I think my point would be that I want to see a new system that is fair to both city and country students so that the incentives for both are there. I agree with what Peter is saying, but the key thing to me is fairness and equity. At the moment, that will certainly not be there if the current changes go through. By all means, change the system so it encourages more students to go to university and encourages more people to take up that opportunity for the future of our country, but please make the system fair on both country and city kids.

**Dr Havel**—I concur with that.

**Senator ADAMS**—Regarding the limit on the amount of money as far as the assets of farming families go, which is \$2.1 million, do you see that as too high or not enough? It would



mainly be for the wheat-growing areas. I know from my practical experience with farming that it cost nearly \$2 million to put crops in and that was without the property or any other assets involved. Can you comment on that?

**Mr Hoskin**—I do not think that would affect a single student in the 2008 year group at Mount Barker. There is one student currently in year 10 for whom that might be an issue when she goes to university. She is the only one that I can bring to mind who would be affected by that in the next couple of years.

**Dr Havel**—Around Albany a lot of our farming is cattle and on smaller lots. They are not the big acreages that you see in the wheat belt. Many of our farms were turned over to plantation industries. With the collapse of those two major companies, many of the people who owned those farms put them out under the plantations. We do not have many students deriving big incomes from farming immediately around Albany. They would be receiving very small incomes.

**Senator ADAMS**—I am thinking about the assets of your boarding students, those from Ravensthorpe and further out in the catchment.

**Dr Havel**—Yes, only about 120 of those who are in the hostel at the moment are connected to the school. Some would go to North Albany and some to St Joseph's, which is the Catholic school. With those families, many come to Albany Senior High School via the hostel because it is cheaper now than sending them to Perth to some of the elite private schools.

**Mr Hoskin**—The asset test would affect some of them in the future.

**Senator ADAMS**—Thank you.

**Senator STERLE**—Dr Havel, could you clarify your comment that youngsters leaving secondary school would rather take up opportunities in the mining industry than go to tertiary education to do, say, a medical course? Is that also because of the costs associated with tertiary courses?

**Dr Havel**—I think it is a multitude of things: cost, limited access and you have to get high scores to get into those courses. The gap between the income of a graduate doctor and other professions is not there any more. They are training many doctors now. We have shortages in all those areas and perhaps the reason for the shortages is the sheer difficulty of engaging in tertiary study and the cost associated with it.

**Senator STERLE**—I understand. I have made enough noise over the years about the cost of university courses. I understand there are other issues involved as well. There is no greater carrot for a youngster than to head north and jump into a mining job for a couple of years and come out with a ute and a rental property. I want to go to the collapse of Great Southern. Is it true that the Great Southern plantations around Albany are all blue gum?

**Dr Havel**—Yes.

**Senator STERLE**—Would I be right in assuming that the trees are still in the ground at this stage?

**Dr Havel**—Yes. The impact of the plantations on the farming community depends on how long the trees have been in the ground. The situation here is that if you had a lease on the trees and the company did not make the payments, the trees reverted back to the farmer. These companies in receivership are paying the lease payments on anything near harvest time, but anything that is five or six years out from being harvested they are letting it revert back to the farmer. That is the situation that is occurring and the people who hold the farms are being taken advantage of.

**Senator STERLE**—Are there many tertiary students in your region who were employed on these plantations?

**Dr Havel**—No.

**Senator STERLE**—Is it in the spin-off businesses where students are employed—the services and hospitality industries?

**Dr Havel**—Yes, there are a lot of industries around the plantation industries in the town and a lot of those are suffering at the moment because of the collapse.

**Senator STERLE**—I have to confess to not having been to Albany for quite a long time. Is it fair to still suggest that the part-time work in Albany is seasonal?

**Mr Hoskin**—Not all of it. There is still a good amount of work which is available. It tends to be lower paid. The seasonal work is much better paid. So, with the students who want to earn money to go to university, generally at least one of the jobs that they do will have a seasonal component.

**Senator STERLE**—Typically, in the Albany region, what work would students be engaged in?

**Dr Havel**—We have a lot of retail—things like Target, Woolworths and those sorts of jobs. We have a lot of fast food elements. We have a lot of, basically, clothing stores and tourist-type restaurants in town where they can be waiters.

**Mr Hoskin**—But, to get across the line with that financial limit, they often would need to do things like work at abattoirs. There are a couple of local abattoirs. They might work in the vineyard industry, typically in planting and pruning—less so in processing. As Peter was saying, they might also work in hospitality. A number of students that come from rural properties obviously do work for their parents as well, on the farm and so on, but that is a relatively small number of students.

**Senator STERLE**—Is the work plentiful?

**Mr Hoskin**—Less so than it was last year, but the students in the 2008 group that I know of are all working and are still able to get work towards their university studies.

**Senator STERLE**—Of course you would understand—I am Western Australian—that we in Western Australia have not felt the negative effects of the global financial crunch as much as other states and regions, particularly rural regions. Albany is just bubbling along. So, when the boom does come along, will you have the ability to attract more students to your area to study?

**Dr Havel**—At the moment, they may board; there is the opportunity through our hostel to attract students from outside. North Albany Senior High School is tapping into Indigenous students from the north, and they are coming to the hostel. It is through ABSTUDY and that sort of support that they are coming to Albany. We would hope that Albany Senior High School's performance will continue and that we will attract people from regional Western Australia who might be finding it difficult in the financial downturn to access educational institutions or the top elite boarding schools in Perth. They may change and come to schools like Albany. The hostel is always full at the moment, and that is a trend that we have seen. Farming people, instead of sending their kids to elite boarding schools in Perth, are choosing to send them to Albany Senior High School.

**Senator STERLE**—Out of curiosity—I do not expect you to have the answers on hand—I ask: are you able to provide the committee with the numbers of your students at both schools who either go into tertiary education or go to work? Do you have those figures available?

**Dr Havel**—Yes, they are available, but I do not have them on me at the moment. We do have studies that are done each year where we see where the students go. The gap year does affect that data because, when you interpret that data on whether they are taking up tertiary studies, when students delay it for a year the immediate data is inaccurate.

**Senator STERLE**—Sure. I respect that but, if you could supply the committee with that information, it may be very helpful for us. Thank you.

**CHAIR**—Gentlemen, I have a few questions for you also. One of the things I am interested in, which you touched on at the beginning there and which is coming through in a number of the submissions, is this issue that there should be an acknowledgement that access to tertiary education for regional students is different from access for students from metropolitan areas. When you look at the arrangements currently and previously, there is no real recognition of the difficulties for regional students, is there? We only have the socioeconomic levels, if you like, across the youth allowance. One of the things that perhaps this committee should consider is what we could recommend on how to go about recognising the difficulties for regional students and having assistance in place for that, separating out that issue from the socioeconomic issues. Would that be fair?

**Mr Hoskin**—Bear in mind that on average in WA country students' scores are just over five per cent lower than those of their city counterparts. That is for a whole range of reasons. A number of the universities have in the past had a discounted TER score for certain country students, although I am not sure whether that has happened this year. For example, UWA ran a scheme where they roughly gave a five-point difference to students in the country. However, currently the TER score cut-offs of UWA Albany are identical to those of UWA Perth, so I am not sure whether that is continuing. Obviously students in the country get lower scores for a huge range of reasons, but if there was some way of trying to equate that it would be good.

**CHAIR**—Dr Havel, did you want to make a comment?

**Dr Havel**—Yes. When you live in Perth, even if you live in the outer suburbs, you have access to rail and buses. Even if students get the independent allowance they can stay home and travel to university. For many courses you do not necessarily have to travel in every day and you can get lectures on the net. So there is a huge cost for country students' parents who have to find and pay for, or help to pay for, accommodation. When I did my tertiary studies I stayed at home and did not have to work, because my parents supported me. As Jonathan pointed out, any country student that goes to Perth, even with youth allowance, is going to have to work. They are probably going to have to find accommodation with multiple people in the one house, and if they do not get on there are issues that interrupt their studies. So it is very difficult for a country kid to go to Perth, engage in tertiary studies and succeed.

**CHAIR**—So it would be fair to say that you think the government should look at a policy that puts measures in place to financially assist regional students who have to live away from home to attend university.

**Dr Havel**—I contend that, yes.

**CHAIR**—I was interested in your comments earlier about having to move back to Perth. One of the things that strike me is that if we do not encourage regional students to go to university, knowing that they will be more likely to go back to the regional communities, it also has this double whammy effect of parents having to leave regional towns to go to cities so their children can study, and that is a huge drain on the professional and working capabilities in our regional towns. Do you think if the measures I was previously talking about were put in place that they would assist on both those counts?

**Dr Havel**—I do. I will give you a most immediate example of a family in my school that has been impacted. It is not only the fact that the student goes to Perth, because when something goes wrong while the student is studying—they might have an episode of depression or things get out of control—that impacts the parents that are working down here. They have to travel up to Perth, which distracts them from their job. So not only do you have the risk that people will leave the regions to be closer to their kids and to support them but all sorts of other issues arise. Even if they are staying in the region, their kid studying in Perth can detract from their employment, what they are doing and how they live down there. My son, for example, has gone back to tertiary studies, but his mum has had to leave here to support him. Because he has made some bad choices and now he is re-engaging, he lacks the skills, so he needs parental support. It is not just about having to leave the region. There are inherent difficulties when your kids are living away and they go from being dependent in a household and having parents near them all the time to all of a sudden being totally free and living amongst other kids their own age. In essence a lot of restraints are lifted, and not all kids can cope with that very easily. As parents, we did not want to let our kids be totally unrestrained, so we moved.

**CHAIR**—There are the current measures the government has on the table. I would like to talk very briefly about the gap year provisions. Do you think that consideration should be given to maintaining the \$19,500 criterion over 12 months for living away from home students? At the moment it applies to living at home students as well, and I think that has been part of the issue—in some cases quite rightly, where it is seen that the system is perhaps being manipulated a little.

Do you think it would be worth considering keeping that lump-sum payment criterion available for living away from home students?

**Mr Hoskin**—Yes.

**Dr Havel**—I do, too. My introduction to this whole issue of inequity between city and country was that in our society we know you are independent and, to me, we can focus on inequities between country and city, but, when you reach 18 or 19 and you are able to vote and you are going to university and you are paying HECS, you are not getting your education for free anymore. We value education. When you think about it, innovation and things that bring wealth to the country often do not come through everybody; it comes through individuals, like Fleming with his penicillin. What I am saying is that if we negate the notion of independence and make it very difficult, it not only impacts on all 18-year-olds; it severely disadvantages country kids.

**Mr Hoskin**—I would like to add to what Peter was saying. You said 12 months. Of course, it is not 12 months; it is actually 18 months under the old system. They do not actually get the living away from home allowance until about May, when they actually started university in February, even if they have taken a gap year.

**CHAIR**—Sorry, Mr Hoskin. I did mean 12 months in the 18-month period. Just to clarify, Dr Havel, when you are talking about the independent status—and, quite rightly—are you suggesting that if you take, for example, an 18-year-old who is independent, given that they can vote and go to war, you believe that the independent youth allowance should go to all of those 18-year-olds and over or only to those living away from home?

**Dr Havel**—If you are going to charge them HECS—and university courses now cost a lot of money, and students have to pay HECS, which varies according to the course in which they enrol—to me the issue is then, if they win access to those university courses, the state should support them because they will pay the state back over a lifetime and they have already been taxed.

**Mr Hoskin**—That does not take into account the huge difference between country and city students.

**Dr Havel**—That is why—

**Mr Hoskin**—My preference would be that that difference should be equalised in whatever system the government puts in place. Senator, you were just saying that, if that goes to students in the city, that is great, but you still have the gap between the city and country students.

**Dr Havel**—My preference is that, if you are making them pay anyway and if they have to get that independent allowance, that is like a forward payment of what they have to pay over a lifetime. That to me is more equitable than the current situation, which depends on parental income.

**CHAIR**—Dr Havel, do you know of any work that is being done on the financial impact of opening it up to that degree?

**Dr Havel**—Obviously no. I was just stating a notion. That thought of mine comes from when you have your own kids and you look at your own income, especially to support your kids going through a tertiary institution. When our kids went through university it was a high cost to us and, on top of that, they were paying a huge amount in HECS. My daughter is a medical student. It makes you think about those things and how you do that. I understand that there is a limit on government funding and I understand that there are all those sorts of things. How do you make this fair? Is it fair on a student who is seeking to be independent? How do you establish that independence?

**CHAIR**—It is an interesting point. I tend to think that education is one of the most important things in terms of generating the wealth you were talking about at the beginning. Mr Hoskin, you mentioned bus services. Who runs that service?

**Mr Hoskin**—The passenger transport authority in WA.

**CHAIR**—Is that a state government entity?

**Mr Hoskin**—As far as I understand, yes.

**CHAIR**—So why would it pick up students for a private school and not stop to pick up students for a public school, given that it is a state entity?

**Mr Hoskin**—That is a very good question. I do not know.

**CHAIR**—It is one this committee might pursue.

**Mr Hoskin**—As a government school we try very hard to get good results and to get the very best out of all students, whether they come from rich or poor families, so that just seems to me to be something that is very inequitable. We are quite willing to compete in terms of equity, but that situation just means that students are forced to go to a private school when they could go to a better government school.

**CHAIR**—Thank you very much. As there are no further questions, that concludes our discussion with you this morning, gentlemen. Thank you very much for being part of this and for persevering with the videoconferencing. Normally we tend to have to do just teleconferences, just on the phone, and this has been much more useful. Thank you for giving us your time this morning.

[9.52 am]

**JONES, Mr Chris, Research and Planning Director, Great Southern TAFE**

*Evidence was taken via teleconference—*

**CHAIR**—Welcome, Mr Jones. 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 a department 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.

Mr Jones, you have lodged a submission, which we have numbered 708. Do you wish to make any amendments or alterations to your submission?

**Mr Jones**—No, the submission stands.

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

**Mr Jones**—I will make a brief opening statement which refers to the submission. Our written submission commented on the need to encourage regional students to undertake higher level qualifications, and that was in response to the low levels of educational attainment and the low socioeconomic status of many of the regional households, particularly in the Great Southern region. The second part of the submission was that there is a distinct disincentive to this goal if the proposed changes to the youth allowance are implemented. Finally, we talked about the advantages of utilising infrastructure at regional TAFE colleges to expand opportunities for tertiary education. I will just expand on that little bit. COAG has identified the need to double VET qualifications at the higher level and the Bradley review has identified targets to increase both the numbers in the labour force who have attained a bachelor's degree and also the need to increase the number of student enrolments from lower socioeconomic groups.

At Great Southern TAFE, which is the college I am representing, we have adjusted our business model to look at these priorities, but we are a small regional college and there is only so much that we can do. But you might be interested to know that in essence we have looked at the poor progression of students to TEE—that is matriculation, because I understand there are senators present from states other than Western Australia—and we have worked with schools to provide an alternative entry pathway that combines a certificate IV in VET with a Western Australian Certificate of Education, and that meets the minimum entrance requirement for several universities in Western Australia. We have also implemented a college policy that ensures that each of our diplomas or advanced diplomas articulates with advanced standing into a university qualification.

Our next priority, and we have been doing some work on this, is to develop agreements with universities to have diploma or advanced diplomas meet the requirements for the first year of the degree of that university—in that discipline, of course—and then have the second and third year of the degree delivered at Great Southern TAFE either under the auspices of or by the universities themselves. This aligns nicely with the benchmarks for articulation that have been set up by the Commonwealth for the VET institutes to access FEE-HELP. You may or may not know that, when VET providers were made eligible for FEE-HELP, a sort of benchmark was set that you had to have in place a written agreement with the university that said that you got 12 months articulation for a diploma and 18 months articulation for an advanced diploma, and that is what we have been working towards. That is the end of my statement to you.

**CHAIR**—Thanks, Mr Jones. Before I pass to my colleagues, could you first explain for the committee ‘articulation’ and how that works?

**Mr Jones**—Okay. There are two aspects to articulation. One is where you do a diploma, let us say, in conservation and land management and you want to go and do an undergraduate degree in conservation and land management at a university. ‘Articulation’ in its simplest form means that the university will say, ‘Even if you don’t have STAT, even if you don’t have TEE, we will accept the diploma in conservation and land management as meeting the entrance requirements to progress into the undergraduate degree.’

**CHAIR**—Okay.

**Mr Jones**—The second and more significant aspect is where the university says, ‘If you’ve done a diploma in conservation and land management, we will give you advanced standing towards these units or towards this period of time.’ So having done your year and a half or two years TAFE doing a diploma, instead of then having to do the full three years of the undergraduate degree, you may find that you are credited, to use the old terminology, with maybe 12 months towards that degree, which means that your only then have to do a further two years.

**CHAIR**—Thanks, Mr Jones. I do understand the older terminology, even more clearly than the new stuff! In your submission, you say:

Quite clearly the changes to eligibility for Youth Allowance at the independent rate will have a long term deleterious effect on participation rates in higher education for young people from regional WA.

Can you explain exactly what you mean by that and what you are basing that statement on.

**Mr Jones**—Okay. I was here at the tail end of the previous witnesses. Essentially, in this region of Western Australia—because we have got some data; it needs to be firmed up—it appears that between 70 and 80 per cent of students who are offered a place at university defer for 12 months. That is in this region. They are offered a place when they matriculate and they defer their entrance to university for 12 months. If you look at the equivalent group in the metropolitan area who defer for 12 months, it is only about 20 per cent. Now, why is there a difference between regional and metropolitan students? When regional students defer for 12 months, take a gap year, it is so that they can meet the requirements for the independent Youth



Allowance rate because, unlike students in the metropolitan area they cannot attend university while living at home; they have to relocate to Perth and there are additional costs in that.

You also asked about the ‘long-term deleterious effects’ of changes to the Youth Allowance. At the moment, the arrangement is that students have to earn \$18,000 in 18 months, if you follow the system. So they finish their exams in late November, they defer university, they pick up a job, they work, they get their \$18,000 and then, in May of the following year after their gap year, they are eligible for the Youth Allowance. So for the first three months at university they get no support, but in May the independent Youth Allowance kicks in—and that kicks in for the remainder of their studies at university, for the other 2½ to three years. If we move to a system that says that you have to work full-time for 18 months, you cannot do that in a year; you would have to take a gap two years.

My belief—and it is just a belief, because unless the system rolls out, you can only go on people’s perceptions—is that if you have a student who finishes high school and does not go on to further tertiary studies for two years, there is an increasing chance that you have lost them to tertiary studies. They have got used to earning an income, they have developed networks in the working industry and they have perhaps developed relationships and they will be less willing to go to university and then drop back to a lower income for the two or three years of university study. I think there is an acknowledgement—it has almost become a right of passage in regional Western Australia for tertiary bound students—that you do your gap year.

In terms of the 18 months or the \$18,000 and the nature of the regional labour market, I could not help but overhear what Dr Havel was saying to you. It is true that people can pick up work in the hospitality industry, the fast-food industry et cetera and there is a fair chance that they would be able to work for a solid 18 months in that area. It is a small community here and you tend to know what is happening. I have two sons—one 18 and one 16—so I also see what is happening to the kids. They try to pick up a high-paying job. They are not stupid; they want a high-paying job. High-paying jobs are at CDH, in casual forestry—before the MIS kicked in, but one hopes that the forestry industry will pick up again—and in the meatworks. If you do CDH, generally you get two or three months there and then there is a gap before you pick up your next job.

They may pick up work at the meatworks, at the abattoir here, which is relatively well paid. The meatworks support students who are on their gap year and are quite willing to bring people on knowing that they are going to work for a year and then move on. But, by and large, they do not recruit those students until after Christmas. So you have actually got those students not starting until perhaps mid-January or late February. So all of a sudden then have lost November, December and January—three months of the 18 months they need to fulfil. My point is that, while it is relatively easy to bring together \$18,000 across the 18 months, it is much more difficult to demonstrate an unbroken period of 18 months work across the gap year.

**CHAIR**—Thanks, Mr Jones.

**Senator ADAMS**—Mr Jones, you may have heard me say that for a long time I have encouraged and educated both my sons there, so I am fully aware of what is going on in Mt Barker, Albany and the Great Southern Region. As far as the universities go, now that it is really a two-year deferment, how are the students who wish to go on? Are they being accommodated

by the universities to do that rather than in the first year deferring for one year? That is usually okay, but what is happening now if they have to defer for the two years?

**Mr Jones**—This I am not sure of. I did follow it up last year for a student, and my understanding is that, providing you advise the university that you are going to defer for another year, they will accept that deferral for the second year. I have no evidence to say that you cannot defer for two years. But you cannot do it as a two-year deferral; you have to do it as one-year deferral and then get back to them towards the end of that year and say that you want to defer for a second year.

**Senator ADAMS**—This could really cause some problems for the universities. I guess when we get them here as witnesses we can explore that. I was very interested in your submission, with your comparison between the O'Connor electorate and the Curtin electorate. I think that has some very, very strong points. Would you like to comment further on that?

**Mr Jones**—I can only thank the ABS, as I did not do the research myself. I trust it is accurate. What compounds it as far as the Great Southern is concerned—and I do not have the data to hand; I looked at it a couple of years ago—is that the Great Southern Region actually has the lowest household income of any region in Western Australia. So there is a synergy between the two, if you see what I mean. If, in fact, you are looking at perhaps further disadvantaging households, one would expect to see that gap widen rather than narrow.

**Senator ADAMS**—For my colleagues from the eastern states: Curtin covers the western suburbs and is a very wealthy electorate and O'Connor is, of course, Wilson Tuckey's electorate, which expands for many, many kilometres. It is a huge electorate.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—Mr Jones, I was interested in your evidence where you said, I think, that you have two sons aged 16 and 18.

**Mr Jones**—Yes, that is right.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—Are they both intending to go to university?

**Mr Jones**—The 18-year-old is definitely not intending to go to university and the 16-year-old is definitely intending to go to university.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—So it will be the younger of your sons, I take it, who will be impacted by the change in policy, potentially.

**Mr Jones**—Yes. Basically, I have spoken to him about it and said that there is really no point in him taking a gap year. I do not really want him to take two years between school and university. If he matriculates, which I assume he is going to as he is quite academically competent, then my view is that he will go straight to university. So, for somebody like me, the change in policy has worked, but I am a high-paid Western Australian public servant, unlike a lot of the people who have children going to university. The second thing is, of course, that I have only one child going to university, so the impact on me of supporting him through university is not as great as if I had both children going to university.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—Although the thresholds increase significantly with both going to university at the time when they would be, don't they?

**Mr Jones**—For the independent rate?

**Senator O'BRIEN**—Yes.

**Mr Jones**—I would have to have a look at that. I am sorry; I am not across the detail of that. But I doubt that it would help me.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—I can tell you that the benefits of youth allowance are phased out at a parental income of around \$139,000.

**Mr Jones**—In that case I would gain benefit from that.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—My experience with this is that many parents are not fully aware of how the thresholds work. That is not a criticism; it is just that the complexities in the system sometimes make things murkier. Are you aware of any people in your community who now become eligible for youth allowance without having to establish independence?

**Mr Jones**—Could you explain that a little differently.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—Because the parental income test thresholds have increased, the statistics produced by the department suggest that approximately 100,000 students will be eligible for either youth allowance per se or an increase in youth allowance as a result of the increased thresholds. Have many people in your community made you aware that these changes will benefit them in that way?

**Mr Jones**—No, not at all. I think one of the interesting things with the changes that came out with the youth allowance is that it was very difficult to work out the thresholds. I had a look at the new youth allowance. It was not clear to me how the benefits would flow through. Perhaps that is more a reflection of my competence than anything else, but I would say that if it was not clear to me then there is a fair chance that it would also not be clear to a lot of the people in the community. It certainly does not appear to be clear to the schools in terms of the advice that they are providing to students, and it is not something that our student services area here is across either.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—Were you aware that on the departmental website there is a parental income calculator which will advise of eligibility and the amount of benefit available?

**Mr Jones**—No, I was not.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—That is a bit of a failure for the department, I must admit. It makes it difficult to completely assess the impact in regional areas such as yours. I was very interested in your submission with regard to the Great Southern TAFE delivering the Bachelor of Science (Nursing) degree on behalf of Curtin University. Are there any other degrees that are delivered at Great Southern TAFE?

**Mr Jones**—Yes, we have an agreement with Curtin where they deliver the second and third years of the Bachelor of Fine Arts degree. What happens is that they accept the Advanced Diploma of Fine Arts that is offered by Great Southern TAFE as fulfilling the requirements of their first year, so students who go through the first year of the Bachelor of Fine Arts here can then go on and enrol in the second-year university program. That is a good model. It is different from our arrangement with the Curtin School of Nursing. Essentially the college delivers the Bachelor of Science (Nursing) degree under their auspices, and they give us a payment per full-time-student equivalent. If you like, we recruit the staff, provide the facilities and everything. They do the moderation in Perth and make sure that the degree program's quality is fulfilled.

Our preference by and large is for the articulation model. One of the other areas that I looked at was business. We feel that if we strike an arrangement with the university, where the final two years or final year and a half of the Bachelor of Commerce or Bachelor of Business was delivered at the college, students could articulate into that by going through the Advanced Diploma in Accounting that we offer here and that would be a good model.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—Mr Jones, do you think, if there was more access to part or all of those degrees in the same way as the university courses are being delivered at Great Southern TAFE now, more young people in regional communities such as Albany would undertake tertiary education?

**Mr Jones**—Yes.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—Why do you say that?

**Mr Jones**—The UWA, the University of Western Australia, campus in Albany offer the Bachelor of Education, Bachelor of Science and Bachelor of Restoration Ecology and I think they now have 100 full-time student equivalents enrolled there. That is over a period of four or five years. You have two things there. First, it is a narrow scope of offerings and, second, you are looking at a TE score of 80 going into there. Certainly by providing the places you have the students flow into them. If you look our Bachelor of Nursing here, which we deliver on behalf on Curtin, we could double the number of students. There are a couple of constraints on that. One of the constraints is the provision of clinical places at regional hospitals, which is not Curtin's problem, it is just nature. If you provide the opportunity for students to study at tertiary level in regions, I am quite sure that they would stay. The other thing that perhaps is worth noting is that we inveigle a lot of exams here for external study students. Last year we did 360 exams so there are a number of people studying externally. Perhaps some of those would also study here under a more formal basis.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—That is another area I was going to ask questions about. For regional students, how can we promote the ideas of access to and value of degrees obtained remotely, and should we be looking at ways of using facilities such as Great Southern TAFE for tutorial and other means of connecting those remote students to their courses in a better way?

**Mr Jones**—It is an interesting question. A couple of years ago we looked at setting up what we termed a facilitated university learning centre where people could come in, have access to broadband facilities, have tutorial support and have the types of networks that help to support people in tertiary study. We did not progress it because we could not get the additional funding

for it. We put the proposal up because we thought there was merit in it; I guess is a fair call. I would be uncomfortable to say that, if you put that system in, it would actually make a difference to people who are studying externally. It is a difficult question. It was put up as a pilot because we thought that until you it you would not know whether it would make a difference.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—The other idea that is floating around is that perhaps more courses having a sort of general component, which could be almost delivered anywhere, and then have the university provide the final specifics of the course. Have you thought about that and how, for example, Great Southern TAFE's facilities might fit into that sort of system?

**Mr Jones**—That comes back to our preference. We offer a range of high-level qualifications across a range of disciplines. I certainly believe that a pathway that says that you do a TAFE qualification at diploma and advanced diploma level and then move into second year university in the discipline of your interest is a better model than a generic first year that everybody flows into and then they flow up into the second year. I am not sure that you would get a lot of take-up for that with the way that the university undergraduate degrees are structured, because often you need the underpinning knowledge to move into second year.

**Senator STERLE**—The Great Southern TAFE is based in Albany?

**Mr Jones**—Our major campus is in Albany and we have regional campuses at Katanning, Mount Barker and Denmark.

**Senator STERLE**—So are the majority of your students from the Albany town centre, or do they come from the other regions because you specialise in certain areas?

**Mr Jones**—Seventy-five per cent of our student enrolments are in Albany and the other 25 per cent are spread across the region.

**Senator STERLE**—The students that have come from across the region board in Albany—is that right?

**Mr Jones**—No, they would be attending campuses outside Albany. They would be attending a campus at Katanning, a campus at Denmark or a campus at Mount Barker.

**Senator STERLE**—What other courses do you specialise in down there in Albany?

**Mr Jones**—We are a regional TAFE and we are probably the same as most TAFEs. We have between 200 and 300 qualifications on our scope, so we offer a broad range of qualifications. We offer around about 12 qualifications at the diploma or advanced diploma level—at the higher level—and then, of course, we offer the whole range of apprenticeship programs, except those that require specialist equipment. Apprentices would go up to Perth for programs with specialist equipment. But we offer a broad gamut of programs.

**Senator STERLE**—Do you think that the TAFEs and the universities—and I know you can only talk about the Great Southern area—work well together? I will make it easier for you. Do you share information? Do you assist each other for the benefit of students and, of course, the survival of the TAFEs and the universities, or is it a dog-eat-dog market out there?

**Mr Jones**—No, I would not say it is a dog-eat-dog market. I will give an example, perhaps, which will illustrate the problem. We would dearly like to have a school of business from one of the universities offer the same model of delivery down here for students who graduate through our diploma or advanced diploma of accounting. It is very similar to the model that we have with the Curtin School of Nursing and Midwifery, except that rather than doing the whole degree they just do the final two years of the degree. There are a couple of ways that they could do that: they could auspice us to deliver it or in fact they could deliver it themselves using our facilities. So you have two models there.

But the truth of it is that if you look at the huge number of students that the schools of business at ECU, Curtin or Murdoch deal with in Perth and the focus that they have on overseas students, because overseas students are a significant cohort for them, it is very hard to get a focus when you are trying to say, 'Look, we want you to do all this work to set up a program that perhaps will service the needs of 12 to 15 students a year.' How many hours in the day they have to put towards this is the problem. I think it is a practical reason. It is not a question of not wanting to work with us or a dog-eat-dog situation. It is just a question of having all these priorities and 'Twelve students where?'

**Senator STERLE**—Yes, I can understand how difficult it could be. Thank you very much.

**CHAIR**—I have a few more questions. What I am keen to talk to witnesses about is the general issue of the differences and difficulties in access to tertiary education, particularly for regional students. Looking at it at the moment, I am trying to have a discussion with witnesses about how we could better recognise the difficulties for regional students compared to those in metropolitan areas. If you agree with this, should there be some sort of financial arrangement? We can look at the socioeconomic differences and how they relate to Youth Allowance, and that is all fine, but how should we address the actual specifics of it being more difficult for regional students to access education?

**Mr Jones**—I will steer clear of the financial issues because I think they are a contributor but not the entire answer. One of the problems that we know is that the achievement levels of students in year 11 and 12 in regional Western Australia are not comparable to those of students in the metropolitan area. We have students who are not achieving as well along the academic pathway in regional schools. I think we need to look at alternative entry pathways for regional students. It should not just be the TEE score that you have. We have run a pilot program down here that, on initial analysis, appears to be very successful. If you will bear with me, I will outline it to you.

**CHAIR**—That would be good.

**Mr Jones**—We find that both students and their parents have an ambition for them to go to university. They graduate from year 10 and enrol in a TEE pathway in year 11. At the first semester exams, these students are struggling in some ways, generally because the academic pathway does not particularly suit them. We know there are a lot of learning styles, and the TEE pathway favours one learning style and does not accommodate a number of other learning styles. With Katanning Senior High School, which is where we ran the pilot, we said, 'Why don't we take the students who aspire to go to university?' I think it is really important to acknowledge that it is no good sending someone to university who has no aspirations to go there in the first

place. The students have already said, 'We want to go to university.' What has happened is that at the end of first semester they start to think, 'Maybe I am not going to get to university this way,' or they persevere and perhaps do not do as well as they should. So with Katanning Senior High School we have put together a combined program between TAFE and the high school. Students attend school for 50 per cent of the time and TAFE for 50 per cent of the time. While they are at TAFE, they do a certificate III or a certificate IV VET qualification. This gets into the area of management of VET in Schools. But, prior to this pilot, nobody would do a certificate III or a certificate IV qualification while they were at school. They would have to leave school to do that because the time constraint was too great. We have combined the two, with the support of the high school, the TAFE and the parents.

As I said before, there are universities that accept as a minimum entry requirement, other than the TEE, a certificate IV and a WACE, a Western Australian Certificate of Education. The certificate IV contributes 50 per cent towards the Western Australian Certificate of Education. The students are coming out of their three years at high school with a certificate III or a certificate IV VET qualification. At Katanning it is a certificate IV in information technology. They also have their WACE, which means that they have had some academic rigour on the way through, particularly in English, which we think is important. They have also met the minimum entry requirements of university. We had seven students come into the program in the pilot at Katanning. All of them graduated with their WACE. I think four of them graduated with their WACE and certificate IV. The others graduated with their WACE and certificate III. Of the four who graduated with the WACE and certificate IV, three applied for university and all three got into university.

We are slowly expanding that program. It requires quite a lot of work with the schools and accommodation from the schools, less so for the TAFE. It also requires the universities to continue to accept that as an alternative entry pathway. I put that forward to say that it is no good just looking at what you do with students post year 12 when you have got a TEE pathway to university. I think that for regional students we need to look at more creative ways of working with the students in year 11 and 12 so that they are better positioned to go on to university.

**CHAIR**—It's a very interesting suggestion. Given the basic nature of the fact that it costs more to send a child to university if they are living away from home, particularly in a regional area, should that be specifically looked at as a separate measure by government?

**Mr Jones**—In equity terms it is probably a reasonable call. I think it is less a TAFE comment than a general comment. There is no doubt that having your child live at home and attend university is a lot cheaper than having to rehouse them and relocate them. I think there is a combination of both things. Students who want to live at home and stay in the regional area are good for us, we do not want to see a mass evacuation of all our talented young people up to university—that is not good for our region—so where it is possible for students to attend university programs in regional Western Australia, that is fantastic. We have dribs and drabs of that occurring. I mentioned UWA previously and the bits that we are doing, but it could be expanded immensely. I think we could have many more students who could at least do their first year at university in regional Australia and then look at moving on, if they are going to specialise, to the metropolitan area. For those students who need to relocate to the metropolitan area because there is not the tertiary opportunity in the region then I think there should be some

acknowledgement that those students and those families are paying a higher financial penalty than those people who fortuitously happen to live in the metropolitan area.

**CHAIR**—Thank you very much, Mr Jones. I was telling our first witnesses that this is our first attempt at videoconferencing. Thank you for bearing with us, it has been far more productive than a teleconference. Thank you for your time this morning.

**Mr Jones**—Thank you.

**Proceedings suspended from 10.37 am to 10.56 am**



**BYRNES, Miss Willa Jill, Member, Albany Youth Advisory Council**

**CANN, Mr Alex Declan, Member, Albany Youth Advisory Council**

**CARAMIA, Ms Tessa May, Member, Albany Youth Advisory Council**

**DOUGLAS, Miss Felicity-Jayne, Member, Albany Youth Advisory Council**

**FLETT, Ms Tammy Maree, Facilitator, Albany Youth Advisory Council**

**GILET, Mr Benedict Leif, Member, Albany Youth Advisory Council**

**INGLIS, Mr Mark, Member, Albany Youth Advisory Council**

**McLEAY, Mr Jack James, Secretary, Albany Youth Advisory Council**

**RICHARDS, Mr Dwayne, Member, Albany Youth Advisory Council**

**SLEBOS, Mr Bronson Micheal, Member, Albany Youth Advisory Council**

**STARLING, Miss Ashleigh, Member, Albany Youth Advisory Council**

*Evidence was taken via videoconference—*

**CHAIR**—Good morning to Ms Tammy Flett and all the members of the Albany Youth Advisory Council. This is the first time we have actually done videoconferencing, so please just bear with us a little as we do this. You have given us a submission. Did you want to make any amendments or alterations to your submission?

**Mr Richards**—There are no alterations.

**CHAIR**—Please go on with your opening statement.

**Mr Richards**—We said that it is hard to get 30 hours work a week in rural areas because there is a lack of jobs around and not that much for young people. Most people have to work more than one job because they cannot get a full-time job because employers are not always willing to take on a person for just one year. There is an exploitation of young people since they have to get those hours—employers could exploit this. We also had the effects on study and on health, such as on people's social life, because they have to juggle work and study. Study is about 30 hours a week and they have to juggle work on top of that.

Some courses at uni you can only defer for 12 months, so working 30 hours a week for 18 months is not possible. Also the TER score is only valid for two years, and you might not be able to get into your course the second time around if you can only defer for 12 months because, when it comes to the second time around, perhaps the scores will be higher because people in that round did better. Also, students are living below the poverty line at the moment. There is

also family stress if they have to pick up paying for the student, such as financial and emotional stress.

We also had a reduction in qualified people in rural areas because rural people, when they go to uni, are more likely to return to the rural areas. If you cannot get to Perth there are limited options down here in TAFE, and at our uni in Albany there are limited positions, and you can only do so much time of your course down here. That is all.

**CHAIR**—Thank you very much. We will now go to questions.

**Senator STERLE**—I congratulate you on your submission because it is straight to the point, it is from the heart and it is not filled up with gobbledegook, so thank you. How many of you are actually partaking in tertiary studies now? Please put your hand up so I can see. Okay. And is that because the rest of you are in your gap year?

**Mr Richards**—I am on a gap year, yes.

**Senator STERLE**—Just you, Dwayne, and no-one else?

**Mr Cann**—I am too, but everyone else here is in year 10 or 11.

**Senator STERLE**—Who intends to do tertiary education? Most of you. Obviously for the majority of you that would mean leaving Albany.

**Mr Cann**—Yes, pretty much.

**Senator STERLE**—So the committee can get an idea of the makeup of the group, how many of you have family or someone you could live with in Perth? A couple. So in all fairness half would be relying on some form of shared accommodation.

**Mr Cann**—Yes, the group agrees with that.

**Senator STERLE**—In your submission you talk about how the work is not in your community. We were speaking earlier to a couple of witnesses who led me to think that there was enough work in Albany. Obviously there are conflicting views. Is that correct?

**Mr Gilet**—As a student searching for a job—and I have quite a lot of experience under my belt—I am still finding it quite difficult to get a job in Albany. If there were jobs I would go for them. I have applied in most areas in the central business district and still have nothing.

**Senator STERLE**—Experience in what?

**Mr Gilet**—Mainly in kitchen hand work.

**Senator STERLE**—There is clearly a concern in the Albany Youth Advisory Council submission that the floodgates have been opened to young people being exploited. Do you want to go into a bit more depth about that?

**Mr Slebos**—The reason that we have stated that is because employers understand that students that want to go to university have to achieve 30 hours a week to go for the allowance, so they put the pay that the students receive down. That is why we want to change it from the hour target to how much money you receive.

**Senator STERLE**—That makes a lot of sense. I understand what you are saying. Your council touches on that in terms of a lump sum payment in school holidays or something like that. Is there any evidence of students in Albany being exploited because employers know that they have to get these hours up?

**Ms Caramia**—An example of the exploitation could be the fact that quite a few of our members have been applying for jobs but they have been rejected because the employers want younger people because they can pay them less. Where I have a job, the workers believe we have been exploited because we get paid a very small amount for the work we do just because we are underage. But we are doing the same job that older people would get paid a lot more to do.

**Senator STERLE**—In terms of heading to tertiary education, apart from the drama of getting work in your community what challenges do you face having to leave Albany?

**Mr Richards**—I have to find accommodation in Perth, so that is a problem. I do not have any family or anyone up there. I applied for on-campus accommodation but I will not know about that until December. So if I do not get that I will have to find somewhere to live and people to live with.

**Senator STERLE**—Is the on-campus accommodation available at every university in Perth?

**Mr Richards**—It is limited.

**Senator STERLE**—You said you cannot get that confirmed until December and you hope to start your studies by February?

**Mr Richards**—Okay.

**Senator STERLE**—That is a major problem. I can understand that. It is hard to hear and I know other senators want to ask questions.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—I am from Launceston in Tasmania, another regional community but not quite as far away from the capital as Albany is from Perth. My understanding is that in my community there is some concern about the ability to get 30 hours of work. A lot of the year 12 students imagine that they can get it but are just worried about the continuity of that work over the 18-month period. Is that the same concern that you have or is your concern different?

**Mr Richards**—Yes, that is a similar concern to the one we have. I have two jobs at the moment, but they are both casual and the hours I get can vary. Some weeks I have 40, but sometimes I get as little as 15.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—How would that average out over the year?

**Mr Richards**—I am not sure—about 25 each week if it was averaged.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—Your group is mostly people who imagine they will be travelling to Perth to study—is that right?

**Mr Richards**—Yes.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—There are some courses available at Albany TAFE. Has anybody considered those and what do you think about them?

**Mr Slebos**—Most of the people at the table have considered TAFE, but the difference with TAFE is that it does not let you get a high degree like a university degree; it only gets you up to cert IV or a diploma. Most of us want to go a little further with our education.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—There are some degrees which you can do in part at Great Southern TAFE, we are told. Has anyone considered them?

**Mr Cann**—No, it is still only part of a degree, and some of the TAFE courses that we might want to do are only available in Perth anyway.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—I see that you are also talking about the possibility of pursuing studies close to home and that federal and state governments should work on increasing the number of tertiary courses available in regional centres. Can you give us some examples of the courses you are intending to do? I know that will mean everyone saying something, and that means we will have to have every name, but perhaps you could give us some idea.

**Mr Gilet**—I am planning on doing something in multimedia. I am not too sure what courses, but it would be computer designing or something in university.

**Mr Cann**—I intend to do biomedical science and that is offered at UWA Albany but only for the first year, so I would still have to go to Perth if I wished to complete my degree.

**Miss Douglas**—I want to do primary school teaching. I am not sure what courses yet.

**Miss Byrnes**—I also want to maybe do primary school teaching.

**Ms Flett**—I have already finished my tertiary studies.

**Mr Inglis**—I will be looking to do sports science, but that is not offered at UWA. They are developing more courses in the future but even those may only be the first year and as my degree would go for four years I would have to live in Perth for three years, so there is still a problem.

**Mr McLeay**—I am looking to do psychology and that is only offered for the first year in Albany.

**Miss Starling**—I am looking into forensic science but, like what Mark said, they do not have this at UWA in Albany; they are developing it, but even then it would still only be available for the first year or so.

**Mr Slebos**—I want to do physiotherapy or chiropractoring. Once again, they only offer the first year for those courses in Albany.

**Ms Caramia**—I was looking to do something to do with marine science or women's studies.

**Mr Richards**—I have a deferred place in speech pathology, but that is not offered down here in Albany.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—Thank you for that. Some of the evidence we have received from universities—admittedly not the Western Australian ones yet; we will have that later—has indicated that deferral for two years will not be a problem. Does that surprise you?

**Mr Slebos**—Yes, that does surprise us.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—Fair enough. There is uncertainty at the moment. Hopefully, this inquiry will clarify some of it. The other issue which I have raised with other witnesses is that the department suggests that, with the changed parental income thresholds, many more students seeking to study at university will not need to undertake a gap year and therefore attain independence because their parental income will not be so high as to exclude them from the benefit upfront. Does everyone feel they are fully aware of their entitlements? For example, has everyone looked at the information on the departmental website or used the calculator on the website to work out where they stand?

**Mr McLeay**—I am most probably speaking for myself here but I did not know of anything like that on the website.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—Thank you for that. It is sometimes difficult to disseminate all of the information. I asked that question because I have had some parents contact me and, when I emailed them back and ascertained the income situation and the family situation, in a number of cases the student was actually eligible without a gap year for either a full benefit or a partial benefit. I think we are going to have to make sure that people can get the web address of the matters on the website so people can be really aware of what they are entitled to.

An issue that comes to mind from the submission is to do with the cost of accommodation. For those students who are eligible for a youth allowance benefit, rental assistance is also available where commercial rental has to be paid. Is everyone aware of that?

**Mr Richards**—Yes, I was aware of that.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—So, if there is any benefit available at all, even a partial benefit, rent allowance is normally still available.

**Mr Richards**—Yes.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—Okay, that information has gotten through. In terms of the cost of living in Perth, does anyone have information for us on what it actually costs for accommodation on campus at one of the Perth universities?

**Mr Inglis**—My sister was looking into this and one of the cheapest ones she could find for the whole package—where she stays on campus and they do washing, food, accommodation and everything—was about \$12,000 a year. You still have transport costs if you want to maintain a car. Then you have to pay for all of your university units and other miscellaneous costs. It really adds up and, over five years, that is quite a lot of money.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—You can also work part time while you are at university without affecting your benefit, if you do get a benefit. Is everyone aware that is intended to increase the income threshold you are able to earn without affecting the benefit?

**Mr Inglis**—Yes, but even so it is still quite a challenge because trying to have a social life, go to university and work is pretty tough. Often the pay is lacking as well.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—I am from Tasmania, so I am presuming that more work would be available in Perth than in Albany, but that is only my presumption.

**Mr Inglis**—Yes, there is definitely more work in Perth.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—Thank you for that.

**CHAIR**—I want to say thanks for giving up your time to be here with us this morning. It really is important and it is great to see it from the perspective that you have because, by and large, the reason the committee is doing this is to make sure that students like you have the best possible opportunities in the future. To hear it straight from the horse's mouth, so to speak, is great. As Senator Sterle said before, your submission was excellent and really went to the heart of all the issues that are important to you.

I am sorry I cannot remember who mentioned it, but I want to take up the issue of the cheapest cost of accommodation being around \$12,000 a year. Do you think that the government should look at perhaps having some sort of measures in place to financially assist with that \$12,000 cost of having to live away from home for regional students? When you compare it to metropolitan students, who can live at home, do you think there should be some sort of extra measure in place that would go towards assisting with those types of costs, that \$12,000, which is obviously very different from students living at home?

**Mr Inglis**—Yes, it would be good to have an extra benefit, because metropolitan students have a big advantage.

**CHAIR**—How many of the students still at school intended to take a gap year to get independent youth allowance before going to uni?

**Mr Inglis**—Ten.

**CHAIR**—I assume that most of you would have been using the criteria of \$19,500 over the 18-month period.

**Mr Inglis**—Yes.

**CHAIR**—Given that the government wants to take that away, would you rather that criteria stay available to you even if it only applied to living away from home students rather than all students?

**Mr Inglis**—It would be good if it applied to those living away from home. Most people in rural areas have to live away from home if they want to study at a tertiary level.

**CHAIR**—Finding a job for 30 hours week obviously has the two-year deferment problem, but I imagine finding a continuous 30 hour a week job would be quite difficult too.

**Ms Flett**—Yes. With the previous arrangement of having a bulk amount, rural students particularly could work CBH for the summer holidays and earn the amount they needed in the four months of the grain season. By taking that away, they can still work that period but they do not have that 30-hour average over the year. If you live out of Albany it is extremely hard to get work at all, let alone the 30 hours a week.

**CHAIR**—If the government sticks to the changes and you have to still qualify for independent youth allowance, that is obviously going to make it much more difficult for you. I know Senator O'Brien has referred to the fact that there have been some threshold changes and that there will be some increases, but they may only be partial. Even the whole of independent youth allowance does not really cover your costs and everything you have to do. How do you feel about going to university if you do not have that \$19,500 gap year provision?

**Mr Slebos**—If we cannot get the money to stay up there, I would not even bother to go to university. It would just be too hard to live for those four or five years of study.

**Mr McLeay**—I agree totally with Bronson. If I do not get that money I cannot go to university. My parents just cannot support me up there without that.

**Mr Inglis**—I have been looking at alternatives like doing sports science through ADFA, joining the army and just not doing it all together, because without that it is too much pressure.

**Mr Cann**—Since year 11 we have been told at school to plan our years ahead. It has always been a part of my plan to have that gap year, earn that money and get the youth allowance. Since this has happened it has thrown that all up into the air. I do not have a structured, stable plan that I know I can stick to anymore.

**CHAIR**—I would imagine that it is not only the fact that you then qualify for the independent youth allowance—you also have the benefit of having saved some of that money from your gap year to take with you and help you once you get to uni.

**Mr Cann**—That is definitely the case.

**Senator STERLE**—I take it you would be seeking employment in Albany in your gap year.

**Mr Cann**—Yes, that is what I am doing. I have already started handing out resumes because I finish school in six weeks and am going to have to start working.

**Senator STERLE**—How are the prospects looking for employment down there next year?

**Mr Cann**—Not that good right now. I applied at Coles but they are not hiring me because I am old. A 14- or 15-year-old can do the same work that I could do but they would have to pay me more.

**Senator STERLE**—Is everyone experiencing that? The prospects are not that bright. So, regardless of the youth allowance, the trouble is that Albany is not bursting with employers looking for students to work full time on a casual basis for 12 months. Is that correct?

**Mr Cann**—It is not just Albany. It is probably the case in other rural areas, especially places like Denmark and Mount Barker, because there are very few jobs.

**Mr Richards**—Some of my friends applied for jobs but the retail places where they applied are looking for people more long-term than just a year.

**Senator STERLE**—I think that is important. Thanks for that. When that question was asked of a previous witness, I was certainly led to believe that casual work was plentiful down in Albany. Apart from the usual suspects like Coles, Target and Woolies, are there any opportunities in the hospitality area or working on farms?

**Mr Richards**—There are opportunities in hospitality. At the moment I also work in a restaurant. But our hours there are not guaranteed because it depends on bookings and when people leave. We could do three hours or five hours, so we cannot really depend on a set number of hours. There is also the CBH seasonal work, but that is only for three to four months of the year, so it is not satisfying the 30 hours a week requirement.

**Ms Caramia**—Twice I have been hired at a cafe and each time I have worked there for a few weeks and then they fire me in order to employ younger, less aware girls who will do the work for a lot less pay.

**Mr Slebos**—I worked at a restaurant for about six months. I would start at 5.30 and, if it was not busy for the whole time, I could end at 7.30. If it was really busy I could end at 10.30 or 11 o'clock.

**Mr Mcleay**—I was working at a restaurant, doing dishwashing, and they just fired me after a couple of weeks because they did not want to waste that money on me. They would rather do the dishes themselves. There was not that job there for anyone.

**Mr Inglis**—My dad is a farmer, so I might work for him but as a last resort, because that would be more about helping out the family rather than getting myself some independence. Also, I would easily exceed 30 hours while working, but once the crops are in there is a period where there is not much work. So there would be a surplus of work and then it would all just drop off for a while. It is kind of here and there and seasonal.

**Senator STERLE**—I appreciate that honesty. If you had to work up in Perth, do you think there would be the same problem there—that you would not be able to get the jobs?



**Ms Flett**—I have a lot of friends who went to uni to study since they left school. Some of our previous council members are up there now. They found work quite easily because they could transfer through their current jobs, because they both work for the Coles Group. Others up there have managed to get work at the university, in cafes and that type of thing, or they found work in nightclubs, pubs and that type of thing. They have had no problems, as far as I have heard.

**Senator STERLE**—As you would have heard, Perth, prior to the last 12 months, has experienced an unprecedented boom which has created much employment, but we cannot create policies around booms, as we have found before—it just does not work that way. It is all right to look into a crystal ball. That is very interesting. What that tells me is that, sadly, in Albany the opportunities for youth employment are not there. I appreciate your honesty. Thank you.

**CHAIR**—I think those are all the questions from us. I again thank you all. We are very impressed with not only your submission but also your evidence at the hearing today. It has been very useful and valuable for us. All the best to all of you with your future careers. Thank you for giving us your time this morning.

[11.07 am]

**ITALIANO, Mr Frank, Consultant, Catholic Education Office, Western Australia**

**CHAIR**—Welcome. You have lodged submission No. 292. Do you wish to make any alterations to that?

**Mr Italiano**—No.

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

**Mr Italiano**—The document addresses the issue of equity for all students in Western Australia, especially those in rural, regional and remote areas—perhaps the remote areas more significantly. The paper identifies a number of issues and a number of areas for support.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—I see in your submission that you talk about the cost of travelling to Perth and the cost of accommodation in Perth. Those are key issues. We had some evidence from Great Southern TAFE that they are providing at least parts of some courses, and in one case a full course, for university degrees. What can you tell us about that sort of course availability around the state?

**Mr Italiano**—The paper presents information that some of the larger regional centres—Bunbury, Albany and so on—would have a greater capacity to provide those sorts of services. In terms of the extent of that, I could not elaborate on the courses that would be available. If they are offered by those regional centres they would not necessarily be the full suite of courses that would be available if you were in a metropolitan area. The capacity of those facilities to be worthwhile would depend on access to internet facilities. They may be videoconferencing, and I know there are some issues with that—they are not always successful. In terms of the range, I can generally say that larger regional centres would have a better capacity to provide that service and those further north, in the Kimberley region and in remote areas away from the major centres, would find that very difficult.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—What about students who are studying remotely in correspondence-style courses?

**Mr Italiano**—The paper does address the fact that, if you are in a government school, access to the School of Isolated and Distance Education facilities is well structured and available. For those in Catholic schools, the cost of those facilities is quite prohibitive, as evidenced in the paper—thousands of dollars per course. So it is a different situation for those in non-government schools in terms of accessing those facilities, which are very well resourced and available for government school students.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—What would be the most important systemic change that you could think of that would benefit the remote students in accessing tertiary education?

**Mr Italiano**—Rather than going into specific courses, one of the things that I am finding in this position is that it is unacceptable or unusual that the different sectors and agencies providing an educational service do not seem to be doing it in a coordinated way. You have TAFE facilities, government schools, private schools—Catholic and also independent systems—and training groups that seem to be doing their own thing. I am involved in a project in the Kimberley region, and we are trying to get some things happening there. Recently, for the first time, I think—maybe I am wrong; I should not say that—the Department of Education and Training, the TAFE college up there and a group called Kimberley Group Training, which is a registered training organisation, have been getting together and saying: ‘What programs do we have in place? How can we move forward? What facilities can we share?’ There seem to be some facilities, there is money and there are some staff. But you would hope that you could coordinate that to use those funds in the most appropriate way. So I think there should be an audit of what is available. But, as the paper suggests, there are some facilities and courses that are not available to all students. If it is for government schools and is funded for government schools, other students do not get access to that.

**Senator O’BRIEN**—So your focus is more on secondary than tertiary education.

**Mr Italiano**—Yes.

**Senator O’BRIEN**—What assistance is available from the state government for remote students when they have to travel to the city for educational purposes?

**Mr Italiano**—I will not make any comment about the government schools, but I believe that there is no government accommodation in the metropolitan area. Those students who are in the Catholic schools would have to access their own. I honestly cannot comment on what support you would receive if you were in a boarding facility or a hostel here and you were not in a government school; I cannot comment on what subsidy or financial assistance is provided.

**Senator STERLE**—Mr Italiano, could you go into a bit more depth on what you are doing, or trying to do, in the Kimberley.

**Mr Italiano**—It is a senior secondary focus—a focus on secondary students—dealing with six or so schools, mainly in the remote desert regions to the east of Broome.

**Senator STERLE**—Primary schools?

**Mr Italiano**—Most of them would be officially designated as being K through to year 10, whereas on the coast St Mary’s is our biggest college—it is in Broome—and is K to 12. So it is looking at what the situation is in those schools and trying to develop and improve programs and choices for students in those schools. We have evidence that the literacy levels are very low, so trying to provide secondary courses for those students is difficult because, perhaps, literacy levels for a person in year 9 or year 10 would be at the year 4 level.

**Senator STEPHENS**—Are your findings of the low literacy levels due to remote Indigenous communities or are you talking about the students mainly in Broome?

**Mr Italiano**—No, it is generally in the remote Indigenous communities.

**Senator STERLE**—So in Kununurra, you are trying to replicate St Mary's?

**Mr Italiano**—I cannot give you any details about Kununurra. We are mainly looking at six or so schools south of that region. There is no secondary at Kununurra, from my understanding.

**Senator STERLE**—Do you have boarding facilities at St Mary's?

**Mr Italiano**—There are some facilities for students in Broome.

**Senator STERLE**—How well are they received?

**Mr Italiano**—I do not have a lot of information on that. The only evidence I have is from a person who has been teaching in one of those remote schools where there has been some success. But there are some issues around the fact that it draws on students from lots of Indigenous communities and because they are reasonably close to Broome there are some issues to do with the different groups. Therefore the success of it is diminished. There is also the issue of boys and girls being in one facility.

**Senator STERLE**—That is why I was keen to pursue that, but I will leave that.

**Mr Italiano**—But there are some models to have the students come to Perth, for example.

**Senator STERLE**—Would you like to tell us about them?

**Mr Italiano**—I can give you one example. A college in Middle Swan called La Salle this year introduced 11 or 12 students from a place called Balgo, a remote community to the east of Broome. Those students are boarding at a nearby community called Swanleigh and attending school at La Salle during the day. That has been successful at this stage.

**Senator STERLE**—How is that funded?

**Mr Italiano**—I cannot comment on the funding of that one.

**Senator STERLE**—Are you able to take that one on notice and provide it?

**Mr Italiano**—Yes, I think I could.

**Senator STERLE**—I am very interested in your submission where you talk about boarding schools in the metropolitan area. I must confess I did not know that there is none in the non-government sector. I noticed Murdoch University have constructed a new block of boarding facilities. Could you give us your insight into the provision of boarding in the metropolitan area for rural students? You have touched on Swanleigh with the Indigenous community from Balgo. To your knowledge, is there anything else the committee should be aware of?

**Mr Italiano**—At the moment, Clontarf, which is a college in Waterford, has students who board in two separate facilities. Boys and girls are in two different place, one in Fremantle and one north of the river—I am not exactly sure where. There are plans for a boarding facility to be built and expanded at the site of the school. I cannot comment any further on that.

**Senator STERLE**—I fully understand that and I will direct my question on boarding to the universities. I appreciate that you cannot comment on the non-Catholic sector.

**CHAIR**—In your submission, which is very useful, I want to explore the issues around years 11 and 12 in the smaller centres. You refer to students who wish to undertake years 11 and 12 either have the choice of doing it by correspondence or moving to a larger centre. Can you explain why that is the case? Some of it is quite obvious, but could you outline for the committee exactly why years 11 and 12 are not offered to the same degree as years 7 to 10.

**Mr Italiano**—There are a lot of factors. It depends on whether it is a large or small regional centre. One issue is that if you have small numbers within your school, there would be small numbers choosing certain courses in years 11 and 12. If you only have three students applying to do chemistry, you may not have the ability to have a class of three students. That could be No. 1. There could be issues with the fact that with a small number of students, you do not have the ability to provide the courses.

**CHAIR**—The economies of scale are not there.

**Mr Italiano**—Yes. There would be a minimum number required to make that financially viable. Also, in some places there is the issue of attracting qualified staff to run specific courses. Retaining those staff would be another factor. In some areas, obviously that would be more of an issue with remoteness. Offering courses based on student numbers and the qualifications of the staff limit subject choice.

Then, if you are going to practical courses or specific courses that would require infrastructure of a certain type—trades or whatever—again, are you financially able to provide those within that particular area? Schools may only go up to year 10 and may not offer the full suite of courses for years 11 and 12. As a result of that, students would have to make a choice as to whether they would stay or move to a larger regional centre or perhaps even to the metro area.

**CHAIR**—How does the distance ed work in WA? We had some evidence a couple of weeks ago, up on the North Coast of New South Wales, from an organisation that provided the distance ed to that area of New South Wales. How does it work over here? Is it appropriate? Is it working well? Is it delivering it as well as it could?

**Mr Italiano**—Perhaps I should not comment on that, because it is provided by the government. The Schools of Isolated and Distance Education, Leederville—

**CHAIR**—Do you have students in your system who are utilising it?

**Mr Italiano**—Again, I cannot comment on specific numbers but I do understand that on occasion there have been students who have been enrolled in some of those. But I could not give you any numbers.

**CHAIR**—That is all right. We will direct those questions somewhere else.

**Mr Italiano**—From what I know and from my experience of working in the past with some teachers who operate that service, it is I think well resourced and the materials that are produced

are of a very high standard. For those students who access that, it is very good. But, again, we are not able to get that service for free.

**CHAIR**—That is fine. We had from some of our witnesses earlier today some discussion around the fact that regional students by and large did not do as well as city students. Do you have a view on that? Do you have a view on why those statistics show that? I think they said they were five per cent behind on average on HSC scores. Do you have a view on why there is that disparity between city and country?

**Mr Italiano**—This would be a general statement, not in terms of what schools that would be from.

**CHAIR**—No. That is absolutely fine. It is just a general statement.

**Mr Italiano**—Some of those issues would come back again. In some areas courses could run but perhaps the qualifications of the staff would not be adequate for the range of courses. It is difficult to attract people with qualifications to a regional or remote area. With experience, more than likely you are a person who is in a relationship with family, so the chances of you making the decision to move to a regional or remote centre would be lower. The more experienced staff would perhaps stay in metro areas. Then, when you do attract those sorts of people, there is the question of whether you retain them. I am focusing on the issue of the teacher and the qualifications of those people. Is it infrastructure in the school and therefore the students do not get access to whiteboards, projectors and textbooks? You would hope that in 2009 that would not be a factor and therefore you could minimise that. I think the greater impact would be the quality and experience of the staff, as opposed to access to a textbook.

**CHAIR**—Just on that, imagine you are sitting in the minister's office and the minister has said to you: 'Okay. We want to come up with a program that is going to allow us to attract and retain more teachers out in regional areas. What are the three things you'd do, Mr Italiano, to make sure we had the right sort of policy in place to make that happen?' What would you say?

**Mr Italiano**—Three things? Okay: money, money and money.

**CHAIR**—I know there are probably a hundred. Is it simply financial incentives? Should there be some sort of loading for regional teachers?

**Mr Italiano**—Are you talking about going to a large regional centre in the Kimberley or are you talking about remote desert communities? That is perhaps not typical of what you are looking for. It does I think in many cases come down to the financial rewards that are available for those people to attract them there in the first place. The other issue is this. If you are attracting the younger teacher, if you like—whether or not they are recently qualified—and you want to retain them, I suppose it is about quality of life and the opportunities that are there. In being a teacher and providing for your students, do you have access to other teachers you can work with? The mentoring of those teachers in those schools once they go to those areas is really important. If you are isolated and lacking the opportunity to obtain materials and information from others, that makes your job a little bit harder so the chances of you staying on would be lower.

This is not provided in this report, but access to—accommodation is No. 1, but access to quality accommodation. If you are trying to attract experienced people who have a family, in many of these regional and remote areas you would find the accommodation is (1) hard to get and (2) it might not be necessarily suitable for family situations because they tend to be for single people. So (1) is it attractive to be there financially, and (2) once you are there, what is the quality of your life? If the housing facilities are not adequate, then it would be difficult to attract.

**CHAIR**—Is that in existing costs, or is it the added cost of having to perhaps purchase or rent a reasonable facility? Is there any capacity for government to look at potentially funding local council to provide accommodation for teachers to attract—

**Mr Italiano**—It would make sense because, for example, Karratha, just as a guide, I think rental accommodation there would be close to \$2,000 a week.

**Senator STERLE**—But that is, obviously, an extraordinary example. I am not mocking it, but Karratha is just ridiculous full stop.

**CHAIR**—I know it would vary because we are talking very different types of things, from remote to large regional centres and those in between.

**Mr Italiano**—But the access to a greater quantity of housing stock would definitely be a way forward.

**CHAIR**—Is there a role for local government to work with local schools to provide—as you were saying, it is not just about getting a teacher to the town, it is then having to live in that town.

**Mr Italiano**—I cannot comment on whether local government should do that, but my personal opinion is that local governments perhaps have a stake in making sure that the community prospers. I am sure they would have an interest in attracting the right sorts of people to the community and keeping them there. If that is the case, maybe they should be involved in facilitating that. But in terms of who should have primary responsibility for housing in a community, I cannot really comment on that.

**CHAIR**—You mentioned before mentoring and mentors, and the younger teachers out in the regions having mentors. Is there any organised system in place for that to happen at the moment? Is there any process that is in place at the moment for that to happen?

**Mr Italiano**—Most schools would have a system where for anyone coming on board there would be a system where there is a mentor teacher for the first year especially who would oversee what you are doing. Again, in larger places you might have three or four people or 10 people in a learning area or a department, so that would happen as a matter of course, but we could be talking about someone who is the only person teaching that subject. So, yes, generally that would be a part of what would happen in a school for new staff, young staff, training staff. I know in the Catholic education sector, for example, we are specifically looking at mentoring and what we can do with regard to new teachers.

**CHAIR**—So in those instances where you might have a single teacher looking after a single subject, so there is not that mentor network on the ground, do you then access mentors from your Catholic school network or anything like that to assist those teachers?

**Mr Italiano**—Those comments, those suggestions are made to those new graduates and new teachers in those schools. For example, they are encouraged to join associations. For example, if you are teaching history or English you would try to join the teacher association where that provides you with networking opportunities, professional development through the year, courses that are available through the year. The Curriculum Council of Western Australia at the start of each year conducts seminars for new teachers to try to get them into the system, so there are automatic practices that happen. Could that practice be improved? Yes, it could be, but it varies from system to system as to how effective it is.

**CHAIR**—I just want to go back to this year 11 and 12 issue. Obviously if they are not going to do correspondence, there is a need to move to a larger centre. Anecdotally, are you finding, when students are in that position where they have to go to a larger regional centre, that parents will find a way for them to go? Or does it mean that whole families have to shift out of regional towns and move to larger centres?

**Mr Italiano**—Sorry, I cannot comment on the breakdown in terms of whether that is done by family, but I am aware obviously of students who have come down separately. I will give you an example of an issue that is faced. Year 12 exams are coming up soon. For some of the subjects there is a practical component in the exams, for example in phys ed studies you have to demonstrate a skill. They have to have people assess that and that is happening during these school holidays coming up in a week or so. For example, students from rural areas have to come to Perth to have their testing done. If your student numbers are low, two or three students, and you are in Broome, you may have to fly down, paid for by the curriculum council, to Perth to have someone see you do that particular skill in drama or phys ed studies.

One of our schools, St Luke's in Karratha, was given permission because they had about 10 students to hold it in Broome, and I think one student from Port Hedland was going to Broome rather than coming to the city. But recently I heard that students in Port Hedland said they would rather go to Perth. So students in those subjects have to fly to Perth because of the need to do practical exams and have someone see them, at a time when they are just about to start another series of exams in other courses. Those are the sorts of issues they are facing.

**CHAIR**—All right. On the issue of the financial incentive in terms of attracting and retention, across the Catholic education sector is there anywhere where government could change what it is doing or where further financial assistance is needed to improve the system for you?

**Mr Italiano**—Yes. Some of the items that were mentioned in the paper were: support for travel of our students, greater funds for boarding facilities to facilitate that movement of students and continued expansion in technical and further education, because it is an expensive exercise for non-government students so expansion would be good. Also, with regard to students and distance education, which you have touched on today, it would be seen as positive to have access to those facilities in a subsidised way or in the same cluster as for government students.



**CHAIR**—On the issue of broadband capability and technology, how are you finding it out in the regions and what would you like to see?

**Mr Italiano**—Because I have had a bit of a focus on the remote communities in the Kimberley, we recently did a survey of the six or so isolated schools. One of the questions that was asked was: do you have internet access? Generally the answer is yes. Then the next question is: is it reliable? In most cases surprisingly it came across that it was generally reliable, but there were a couple of schools that had issues with that. Also, the speed of the service, even if it is available, could be an issue.

**CHAIR**—So what it can actually deliver could be a little bit of a problem.

**Mr Italiano**—That comes from a question or an understanding of what benefits are to be gained from access to technology for those students in those areas, and there are many. So, yes, that could be a limiting factor. Or are you asking: could technology be used because of the remoteness and the distances involved to try and provide the suite of subjects or courses in a different way—in other words, through videoconferencing or another style, such that you do not have to have those travel issues to remove that isolation.

**CHAIR**—Do you use those interactive whiteboards in your schools?

**Mr Italiano**—I would argue that primary schools would have taken those on board over the last five or six years in a big way. With secondary schools, and again I am generalising, it is definitely in the last two or so years that there has been an increase in the take-up of those systems. The important point now is to use them effectively.

**Senator STERLE**—I would like to go back to the boarding facilities. When you are answering the chair's questions you mentioned greater assistance in funding. Are you talking about regional centres, here in Perth, or both?

**Mr Italiano**—I think the general answer to that would be wherever facilities are required, whether it is regional or in the metropolitan area, so there is greater ability for our system to provide for those students, if that is what their parents wish them to do.

**Senator STERLE**—I am thinking more in relation to the terms of reference for the inquiry which are about tertiary. The evidence has been mainly about regional students coming to the major cities. Has the Catholic education system looked at providing that? I am thinking about Notre Dame, because that is not a small campus. Have you looked at the provision of boarding facilities for regional students?

**Mr Italiano**—I cannot comment on that, sorry.

**Senator STERLE**—Because you don't know?

**Mr Italiano**—No, I do not know.

**Senator STERLE**—Okay, that is fine. I did not know if I was encroaching on some secret handshake!

**CHAIR**—As there are no further questions, thank you very much for giving us your time this morning, Mr Italiano. We appreciate it very much.

**Proceedings suspended from 12.09 pm to 1.33 pm**

**BLACK, Ms Barbara, Director, Albany Centre, University of Western Australia**

**NICOL, Professor Jennifer, Acting Pro-Vice-Chancellor, Faculty of Humanities, Curtin University of Technology**

**TAGGART, Professor Andrew, Dean, Faculty of Arts and Education, Murdoch University**

**CHAIR**—Welcome. I invite you to make opening statements.

**Prof. Nicol**—Curtin has always had a commitment to regional delivery. However, as time has gone by and expectations from students have come into play, pressure has been put on different styles of delivery modes. It would be true to say that learning expectations of students have changed somewhat over the last five to 10 years, and the technological responses to those expectations are perhaps our biggest challenge.

**Ms Black**—UWA is primarily a metropolitan university. The Albany campus and the Geraldton Universities Centre represent the regional undergraduate deliverings. UWA has had a very strong commitment to its operations in Albany. We have been going since 1999, so this is our 10th year. It is important to recognise that Western Australia is a different state to the other Australian states, in that it is enormous. From the perspective of rural and regional students it is huge. All of the universities are based in the metropolitan area and those students have a huge distance to travel to access higher education unless they can access it in the regions, and that is fairly limited.

I do not think the federal government recognises the extra cost to universities in having some component of face-to-face delivery in the regions, which UWA thinks is extremely important, in particular for school leavers. A lot of the focus is on school leavers, but we should bear in mind that we have an ageing demographic. More and more we are going to have mature age students studying at university. Currently in Albany we have a number of mature age students who are women who have completed the intense child-rearing part of their lives and are moving on to acquire a university degree in order to pursue their careers. There are also farmers and other people who recognise that their backs are getting weak and they need to do something else. So we need to have an adequate focus on mature age students as well.

**Prof. Taggart**—If you look at the broader context around Bradley and aspiration levels set by the federal government, it is a time of great opportunity for both upper secondary and higher education. Murdoch is very committed to its mantra of social disadvantage inclusion within higher education. We see our Rockingham and Peel campuses and areas of low socioeconomic status as prime areas for innovative practice, so there is great opportunity there. I am particularly interested in both the regional stayers and the metropolitan leavers that Southern Cross University referred to in their submission. I think there are great opportunities for metropolitan leavers to consider regional opportunities, if the courses exist.

The other areas that I will perhaps talk about in answer to your questions relate to facilities within regional campuses, the ability to offer courses and the financial sustainability of regional campuses. I come to that from the perspective of having been the faculty dean of ECU South

West for three years. In my current role as faculty dean I have the responsibility for the Rockingham Regional Campus of Murdoch University.

**CHAIR**—Where in Perth is Rockingham?

**Prof. Taggart**—It is about 35 kilometres down the southern corridor. It is not so far but, interestingly, under the Royalties for Regions program in this state—which I am sure you are familiar with—it does not qualify for development offices or commission offices, whereas Mandurah, which is another 15 kilometres down the way, does. It is an area of prime social disadvantage in the south-west. It is in our backyard. It is right in our south-west corridor, where we have a particular interest.

**Senator ADAMS**—With Youth Allowance and the new rules about the 30 hours per week that prospective students will have to work, it is going to run to two years of deferment rather than one year. How do the universities—and this is for all of you to answer one after the other—feel about that and is it going to restrict opportunities for students, particularly rural students?

**Prof. Taggart**—Yes.

**Senator ADAMS**—Could you tell us why?

**Prof. Taggart**—There have been a number of submissions on this area from some of our local people on our two regional campuses, and certainly from the Bunbury constituents in my previous job. The link between completing high school and attending university is a fragile one for many in regional and remote settings. To extend the work allowance criterion to two years seems to be somewhat arbitrary and restrictive on that cohort that are in fact very marginal. The link between high school completion and university is tenuous. If we move into a time of better employment options for that cohort in regional and remote areas, it will become even less likely that they will make that jump. It is a big jump for many first generation university students and their families to go from high school to university. To make it two years will make it even more difficult for many students in rural and remote areas.

**Ms Black**—I think it is a terrible outcome for regional students. As it is, they often take a gap year so that they can qualify within the 18-month period. I would also like to know where the number 18 months came from, because it is not rational.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—It is in the legislation now.

**Ms Black**—I think it needs to be looked at because if you want students to go straight from school to university then we are really talking about a three-month window for them to be able to work before they make the transition to Perth. If you are looking at students who are taking a gap year, 18 months is too long.

On the issue of having to work 30 hours a week, in a lot of rural and regional areas there is no work available that is for 30 hours a week. These are students coming straight from school and they are pretty unskilled, so they are going to have a hard time finding a job anyway. I just think we are asking too much of our rural and regional students and putting up obstacles that really

should not be in the way of them having the means to go to Perth. One last thing: anecdotal evidence says that, if they defer for two years, we lose them.

**Prof. Nicol**—To add to my colleagues' answers, I think many of the regional and remote areas do already experience some social and economic disadvantage. The populations in some areas are distinguished by that. I suggest to you that anything that amplifies that in any way is not going to be to the nation's advantage. I agree entirely with Barbara Black's comments about work opportunities in regional areas. This is often what drives people into ongoing study to upskill themselves for higher paid work. A 30-hour limit seems to be counter to that.

**Senator ADAMS**—The hard part is that the 30 hours every week is really just about full time. I am an ex-farmer from Kojonup and put two boys through university, so I know of the work that they did to keep themselves going.

**Prof. Nicol**—Particularly in a climate where we are seeing a reduction in work hours amongst the working population generally. I am not quite sure what the standard average hours are the moment, but the graphs are showing a decline in average weekly hours which would probably be moving towards the 30-hour target.

**Prof. Taggart**—I think there is probably a small window of opportunity for regional campuses which is discouraging people to go to Perth because of the affordability. So there is a chance, if their chosen course exists in their local community, that a proportion will choose not to go to go to metropolitan campuses and will stay locally, where they can work, stay at home and live a lot more affordably than they would if they had to move to Perth and pay for accommodation.

**Senator ADAMS**—We probably based this morning on looking at the Great Southern and the South-West areas, but once you get up to station country and going north there is a complete change of focus. Also, in the Great Southern area, where I come from, it is fine if you are in Bunbury or in Albury, but if you are in Kojonup or Katanning, there is a limited amount of TAFE. It is still the same; you still have to go away from home and find accommodation, feed yourself and do all the other things, plus try and find a job.

**Prof. Taggart**—As Jennifer alluded to, with advances in technology there are some opportunities for that to happen at home base with visits for intensive group work in summer, winter or other study periods. I think all universities—and certainly we at Murdoch were in a recent submission to the education infrastructure fund—are about targeting sophisticated ICT delivery for remote students. That is a way of addressing in part some of that need to remove themselves from their local environment, but it does not address the issue of social cohesion and engaging academically and socially at a metropolitan or regional campus.

**Senator ADAMS**—As far as deferral for two years, how are the universities going to handle that?

**Ms Black**—UWA has already said to students who have deferred for this year that they can defer for another year. So they will not lose their place—but, will those students in fact take up their places?

**Senator ADAMS**—That is right.

**Prof. Taggart**—Coupled with a half cohort going to Western Australian schools, which will decrease the 2014 intake dramatically, we will have a lot of capacity. To have this added to a two-year deferral that can become three years and can become never coming will add to our challenges in meeting our CTS load.

**CHAIR**—On that, you say that universities have to offer deferrals of two years. Are universities happy to do that on an ongoing basis? If these changes come in, the universities are going to have to be happy to do it not just for this period but on an ongoing basis.

**Prof. Taggart**—Currently, if they apply through TISC and they defer for more than one year, we then treat them as applicants applying directly to the university. I think that is what most of us do. I am not sure about the University of Western Australia, but certainly ECU and Murdoch do that. That is the reality of not necessarily attracting high-level and high-achieving students straight out of high school as UWA does. I think we will have to be responsive if that is what is the legislation is forcing us to accept.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—In terms of the legislative change, you are aware, I take it, that the federal government have taken out the so-called part-time test—that is, an amount of money, which is now roughly \$19,000, earned within an 18-month period which currently allows qualification as independent for the purposes of the legislation. But we have left in the current provision the ability to work 30 hours a week, irrespective of the amount of income, over 18 months, to qualify as independent. The parental income thresholds are being increased in relation to students who reside at home or live away from home, and there is an even higher threshold for families with two students living away from home and attending university. We have benefit available, in those circumstances, up to an income of about \$139,000. What do you collectively know about the impact of the increased thresholds, which, for some students certainly, must make it unnecessary to undergo a gap year? In other words, they do not need to qualify to establish independence because they qualify under the parental income test.

**Prof. Taggart**—The latter part is a positive outcome. If you just add a twist to that and stop the independence provision and the 18 months or 30 hours provisions for all students enrolling in regional campuses you will grow the regional campuses.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—That is another question I want to come to. In relation to the age independence test, under the current legislation you are deemed independent, irrespective of other circumstances, at the age of 25. The proposal is to reduce that to 22. Do you support that?

**Prof. Taggart**—Yes, and particularly so for students from low SES areas. It is not uncommon for 16-year-olds to be independent. That applies to some of our students in Rockingham and Mandurah.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—It is a legislative package designed around cost neutrality, based on the current legislation. The department have suggested that something approaching an additional 100,000 students either will be eligible for a benefit without establishing independence or will receive a higher benefit under the legislation. Do the universities have any information on that, from that experience?

**Ms Black**—Not that I am aware of.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—That is the difficulty. When students come to university, do you know what their parental income circumstances are, in order to make a judgment?

**Prof. Taggart**—We do not so much know the parental circumstances, but a large number of our students are mature age, independent people from areas of social disadvantage, so we do collect that information, through disclosure. I would see all of the latter outcomes, apart from the 30 hours, as being benefits for our student cohort in particular.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—This is my suggestion, not necessarily the government's, but if the government were happy to look at amendments, provided the legislation continued to create the same cost burden for the government—in other words, it was a cost neutral outcome—which area would be most important?

**Prof. Taggart**—I think the area of greatest importance is to build capacity and vitality in regional campuses. I think that is most important because you could get on a roll and regional campuses could start to grow and sustain themselves. Most students of social disadvantage that Murdoch has live in Mandurah and Rockingham. I will not speak for Arshad because I used to work for him. Bunbury is the same. I would suspect that Kalgoorlie, Northern and Albany are similar examples for all of our regional campuses.

So the challenge is to build sustainability in regional campuses. If the legislation could be directed towards that outcome, it would have a multiplier effect on a whole range of areas—for example, first year students deciding to spend that year at a regional campus as opposed to coming to Perth, because of the affordability issue. I think those aspects can possibly be built in.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—Explain to us how government funding affects that. Is it really a choice matter?

**Prof. Taggart**—I am happy for colleagues to respond before I do.

**Ms Black**—Regional campuses tend to have their own regional HECS places—Commonwealth-supported places. There has been a growth in the number of regional places available, and there has been some growth, but less, in the metropolitan campuses. If, for example, a university fills its quota of HECS places on the metropolitan campus and it has regional places available, then that is a good thing because then there is more income coming into the university as a whole and into the regional campuses. It is hard to see the drift from Perth to the regions in Western Australia. People will certainly go from a regional area to another regional area to study, but my experience has been that Perth is where everything happens and where all young people want to be. But I think that if there is not more encouragement for students to attend regional campuses then eventually there will not be any, because we are just not going to get the students in. It is hard enough—I am sure my colleagues will agree—to maintain a regional presence even when you are using online technology and having a minimum of face-to-face teaching. It is very difficult for the universities to do.

**Prof. Nicol**—The other thing that should be added is that regional campuses are not a homogeneous group of centres. There are those that are in the outer periphery of the metro area,

and they have some distinct advantages over those which are more scattered. For example, Albany is quite a long way from Perth, as is Geraldton. There is a presence, for example, in Karratha and Kalgoorlie. So you are talking about different classes of regional campus here. The challenges for the two sets of campuses are not the same, and I think that really needs to be acknowledged.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—We heard some evidence earlier today about Albany and the availability of courses where you could do the first year of a degree at the TAFE—not through the TAFE but delivered physically at the TAFE for the university.

**Ms Black**—This is with Curtin?

**Senator O'BRIEN**—Yes.

**Prof. Nicol**—Curtin art.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—There are apparently a number of degrees available in that context, but not beyond the first year.

**Ms Black**—Certainly for UWA they were not delivered through the TAFE; they were delivered through the university centre in Albany.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—That was my understanding of the evidence. However, is it common for there to be this sort of 'one year away, two years in town' approach to degrees, or are regional universities more likely, in the Western Australian experience, to be delivering whole degrees in the regional campuses?

**Prof. Nicol**—From Curtin's point of view, the biggest of our regional degrees would perhaps be in education. The enrolment evidence would suggest that there are students there doing the four years of the degree in the regional environment.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—Where is that delivered?

**Prof. Nicol**—It is delivered in Albany, Geraldton, Kalgoorlie, Esperance, Karratha and Margaret River, so there are quite a number of centres. The difficulty of this is the quantum of students at any one of these centres, spread across a four-year degree. A full-time load is eight units within a year, so a student might have to complete up to 32 units of study, and we have small numbers in each year of the degree. That is where the question about the sustainability and financial viability comes into play, particularly when you are looking to give a value-added experience to students involving sessions working with other students who are studying that same unit of work, for example. That is the enormous challenge.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—Should we be encouraging regional students, where there is an appropriate degree, to study at the regional campuses?

**Prof. Nicol**—Our view is that, yes, we should be. It seems to be in the nation's—and particularly in Western Australia's—best interest for students to be trained and prepared to work in many of those regional and remote areas. They have been notorious in their ability to attract



qualified staff in industries like teaching and nursing. It would be the case that, if people went to Perth to study, the inclination would be to stay in Perth to work. The attraction of placing people in a rural or regional setting is that they are more comfortable working in that environment post graduation.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—It was interesting. We had some young people, in a group described as the Albany Youth Advisory Council, give evidence by videoconference. I think about three out of the 10 were talking about doing a primary school teachers course, but they were focusing on having to go to Perth.

**Prof. Nicol**—That surprises me because there are plenty of opportunities in both early childhood and primary education—a district degree set—here in Western Australia. Through Open Universities Australia there is presence as well.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—So that could easily be delivered in their local community?

**Prof. Nicol**—And is.

**Ms Black**—I think the problem is that in order to make these courses viable for delivery to the regions there has to be a substantial IT component. A lot of it has to be delivered by distance education, generally using the internet. School leavers often want more of a social interaction. There is research—and I cannot quote where it comes from—that for the first degree, particularly for school leavers, they want the face-to-face experience. Usually after students have done their first degree they cope better with online courses for postgraduate study. That might be changing at the moment because young people are so competent with IT. For example, the primary and early childhood education programs that are offered by Curtin through the UWA Albany centre are moving more and more towards being solely online with a weekly face-to-face interaction. Not all students have the motivation to cope with distance education and a lot of them want to have a place where they can study with other students. While distance education has a lot to offer the regions, I think the face-to-face component is often what students need in order for some self-discipline and social learning as well.

**Prof. Nicol**—Could I respond to that. This year Curtin has got involved in offering its Bachelor of Education (Primary Education) through Open Universities Australia and it has taken off like a rocket. While it is offered nationally and we have some expatriates offshore doing it, we have had—and I could not count the number of heads—something like just under 8,000 units so far this year and we have one study period to go. That suggests to me that online learning is generally acceptable to a wide band of the population, but the onus is on the deliverers to do something with that environment. They are now using a lot of social interaction through online learning, and that goes to what Barbara has been talking about—that is, for those people who need to be engaged in a social networking environment. Discussion groups, chat lines and blogs and certain technologies, such as Illuminate, which allow for contemporaneous videoconferencing amongst participants, can deliver a bit of that. I am not saying it is the same as being in the same room with a group of people, but a lot of people are suggesting that that is a satisfactory mode for them.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—That is interesting. I suppose the focus on expectation might be why a number of the young people are saying: 'I always expected I'd go to Perth and do this. I

expected that I'd have this pathway—take a year off, earn some money, get youth allowance and go to Perth and do the course. Even though the course is emerging as being more available in our local community, I was focusing on that expectation.'

**Prof. Nicol**—I think we should stand back from thinking that, if you are in Perth, you are doing it all face to face and, if you are in the regions, you are receiving an arms-length mode of delivery. More and more students who come to campus for study are looking for some blended learning opportunities. They want the flexibility that that can provide for them. A lot of them are working quite substantial hours and being locked into specific timetables. It actually does not mesh all that well with their lifestyle expectations. So we were having to respond at the local level to this, and it is just another crank up, I think, in the regional area. I think the essence of the question is: how much can you support regional students outside the technological response? That is the real question—what can be afforded and what can be delivered in a meaningful way?

**Senator ADAMS**—To carry on from that, can you use Muresk and the decision you are making there as an example?

**Prof. Nicol**—I am not qualified to speak about the Muresk situation because I have not had anything to do with that process of discussion, but it is always the case about what you can support in those environments. My understanding of the Muresk situation is that they are maintaining courses that are available at Muresk, but the total face-to-face delivery mode through Muresk is under threat.

**Senator ADAMS**—Yes, I realise that. I should just explain that Muresk is Curtin's agricultural university precinct, which is inner northern. It is under threat of closing, mainly because, once again, students are looking at coming to Perth. How that is going to be delivered, because of the practical component of it—

**Prof. Nicol**—A lot of courses have practical components. I know that in the case of teaching and nursing these are prime problems in the delivery in rural environments because you actually have to go to a school or to a hospital. So in cases where those facilities are not available in particular areas it does present problems. While students may be involved at a particular regional campus, they may in fact live hundreds of kilometres away from that centre. It is that travel to and from face-to-face classes or the practical component that complicates matters a lot. I think many students find the challenge of meeting the professional experience obligations the most daunting as part of their regional experience.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—Are there schools of thought within the university sector about how you equip people for what everyone must see is the emerging reality of online education delivery? Everyone probably submits all of their papers online or by email.

**Prof. Nicol**—They do not even have to do the email thing anymore.

**Prof. Taggart**—Many of the students are leading the university professoriat towards that end rather than, regrettably, universities leading the way. In some instances we are responsive rather than proactive.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—What I am getting at is: given that that is the emerging thing, what thought patterns are developing; what work is being done on how you marry the educational needs with the technological possibilities?

**Prof. Nicol**—Andrew, you might want to speak about your plans there—your submission.

**Prof. Taggart**—Yes. Submission 1 was short-listed and rejected by the minister. The second was short-listed and rejected, but we got the third one in. We are persistent if nothing else! We have a project at the moment with Indigenous communities in the north-west with education assistants. There are a large number of education assistants who want to complete the formal education qualification and stay in the region. Similarly, we place students in the Fitzroy Valley on a range of practicums, supported by the state department of education. Retention in those regions and getting qualifications is very difficult. We believe the real-time connectivity between remote sites and students who are engaged in real-time activity both in South Street and in Broome or Fitzroy Valley is important.

If they can connect so that a remote school in the Central Desert, for example, at the beginning of the year—with appropriate ethics approval—can be beamed to our students working on their Bachelor of Indigenous Studies or Bachelor of Education (primary) course, they can get a much greater and realistic sense of what it is like on the first day of class in a remote community. So the proposal for this building is to be able to do that, working with Charles Darwin University, in fact, in the Northern Territory and then with a range of partners in the remote country school service in Western Australia. We hope we can build resilience with our undergraduate students, both locally and online, so that they can stay in their communities and then build capacity and 'grow their own' within their local community. So that is an important initiative.

The other tack I would like to introduce is that it is fine for school leavers to want to come to Perth or go to a regional campus, but if we are going to meet the aspirations of 20-20-20 per cent, we are going to have to raise the aspiration level of people in regional and remote areas and areas of social disadvantage. That is a much bigger challenge. School leavers being the second generation, third generation families in university—not a big ask, really. There are some issues, but it is the aspiration levels of people in areas of social disadvantage and regional and remote areas that have to be changed. So our articulations from TAFE and diplomas into university courses and other pathways for students to enter are fundamental to reaching that target, which I think are in fact much bigger issues than high-achieving remote area students coming to work and study in the metropolitan area. That is a much bigger area. It is a laudable aspirational target, but it is a bit like Bob Hawke's 'no child in poverty', unless we give it some legs, some strategies and resources, to make it happen.

**Ms Black**—I have just a couple of comments. The way that higher education is now in WA is that there are some courses that are only available in Perth. All you have to do is look at the TISC guide to see what is available only on campus, and most courses are available only on campus. There are some courses that cannot be delivered in a regional area, like an entire medicine degree, or physical education or engineering; they need to be done on the main campuses because of the way they are structured at the moment. We need to make sure that regional students can get to metropolitan campuses to do those courses.

We have already talked about the Youth Allowance independent requirement and how that is problematic as it stands at the moment. Is there going to be an opportunity to comment on the Commonwealth scholarships and how they are going to change?

**Senator O'BRIEN**—Absolutely.

**CHAIR**—Absolutely. Go for your life.

**Ms Black**—Okay. I do not have a great deal of information about this, but what I have been told by the scholarships office is that, in order to be eligible for the revised scholarships, students actually have to already be eligible for Centrelink. So a student who is not eligible for independent status with Centrelink is not going to get one of these scholarships. Apparently there are different types of pensions that are going to be eligible, and it seems that we might be missing a few people. There does not seem to be a great deal of information available at the moment, so forgive me if I get some of the details wrong.

The relocation allowance is \$4,415 in the first year only and \$1,000 thereafter. I do not think that this takes into account the fact that regional students, particularly if they are school leavers, keep relocating. They go up to Perth for their first year. If they are lucky, they will get a place in a residential college; if not, they have to find a place to stay and somebody to share with, and transporting the second-hand fridge from mum and dad's is not quite as easy for them. A lot of them will go home during the holidays because they want to see their families and also because then they do not have to pay for college accommodation or pay rent during that period. So they keep having to relocate all the time. I do not think that \$1,000 is really going to do it, particularly for a student who might live up in the Pilbara. Albany is a 'mere' 400 kilometres from Perth, but if a student is living up north the distances are huge and the only way they can travel—apart from spending two days driving, if they can afford a car, or on the bus—is by flying, and regional airfares in WA are a lot more expensive than they are in the rest of the country. So I think that those changes to the scholarships need to be looked at in terms of who is eligible for them and also what regional students need for each and every year of their degree in order to stay in Perth.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—I think there are some transport allowances as well that may be available.

**CHAIR**—Going back to the issue of living away from home and the financial costs and other difficulties with doing that compared with students who can live at home and attend university at the same time. There has been some thought that there is not enough acknowledgement of the financial cost and difficulty for the student living away from home. Following on from what you were saying about all those difficulties and putting Senator O'Brien's cost neutrality to one side for the moment, should the government be looking at separate measures that target those living away from home difficulties in a financial way? So not included in the normal youth allowance with which, if you are living at home or you are living away, you can see whether you are assessed against the criteria, but a separate entity. I am not quite sure how that would work. Is that something you think the government should be looking at in recognising the difficulty of access for students who live away from home? By and large it would work in reverse as well. So if you are a metropolitan student and you want to go to a regional institution—this might also

address the issue of incentives to get students out to regionals—that there is a separate measure in place targeting that difficulty of living away from home.

**Ms Black**—I think moving away from home, that is, moving into a regional area, is the key thing for a metropolitan student. Whether they live at home or they choose not to live at home, they are dealing with a different set of financial difficulties. The other issue is student accommodation. Residential accommodation is very limited in Perth. When last the Albany centre tried to apply for funding from the federal government through the CDP program for student accommodation, the word came back that the federal government was not interested in paying for that. I heard through the grapevine that they really saw student accommodation as being a commercial enterprise.

In regional areas you do not have enough students to make any property developers interested in financing a residential college for students. Unless the government provides money for that, it is not going to happen. In the metropolitan areas, I think my colleagues would agree that there is a need for more student accommodation at an affordable price.

**CHAIR**—Professors Taggart or Nicol, do you want to comment on the idea of a separate measure to target this living away from home issue?

**Prof. Taggart**—I think for school leavers it is an important issue, particularly for those coming from remote areas because air travel and visiting home is almost impossible. Then they have to give up their work. Our students are working between 15 and 35 hours a week to sustain their studies. So they give that up to go home. I still think the bigger picture issue is mature age students with family responsibilities. It is not an option to leave home. You are not going to bring a family and children's education to Perth and give up your employment or family support in those regions. I think that in terms of meeting the 2020 target is a much bigger challenge than addressing, yes, the realistic issues of high school leavers living in metropolitan Perth.

**Prof. Nicol**—Moving into the regional areas I know that in particular there have been initiatives on behalf of all universities over years to try to get metropolitan students to take up experiences in regional and remote areas. One of the major obstacles to that has been that there has been nowhere for them to stay in these areas. So all the will in the world is not going to translate into any effective. I know, for example, in Broome they have just built a residential college for secondary students. It was a combined event through the department of education here and Catholic Education to encourage Aboriginal students to engage in ongoing high school education.

That was a multimillion dollar investment, but it relates to the practicalities of those students' lives. It allows them to come in to Broome, have their education during the week and then go back at the weekend, to somewhere reasonably close by, to keep them connected to their communities and to their families. But most regional centres do not have a provision like that. Accommodation is scarce. If it is there, it is expensive. They are not interested in the itinerant person who might be coming up to do teaching practice or nursing practice there. These are all limits which work against the initiatives of universities to try and get greater engagement with regional communities.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—Can I introduce something into this conversation. My office is in Launceston, in Tasmania. UTAS has a campus there and a campus on the north-west. The main campus is in Hobart. For their international students they run a program of getting private householders to board those international students. Is there any such program within the regional communities to do just that?

**Prof. Taggart**—Yes. Finding affordable student housing in Perth is one of the most challenging jobs in university.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—But not just in Perth; in the regional communities as well.

**Prof. Taggart**—Certainly in Bunbury, when I was at ECU, we had to work that out for a small number of international students.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—What about non-international students?

**Prof. Taggart**—Students in that region had free bus travel as part of their enrolment. That was a state government initiative, I believe. So that created less of a need to travel, although we did have people coming in from Augusta, for example, south of Margaret River, by bus. They would leave at quarter to six in the morning to get to their nine o'clock lectures, which was a bit of a challenge. Bunbury campus, for ECU, has great on-campus housing. It is a bit like Charles Sturt in Wagga Wagga. It has wonderful facilities.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—What I am asking here is: is there such a program for domestic students who are living away from home in regional centres or in the city that facilitates a private boarding arrangement?

**Prof. Taggart**—Yes.

**CHAIR**—Thank you very much for being here today. I am sure we could continue this for another three hours if we had the time available. Professor Taggart, before we wind up, would you mind taking something on notice. I think the issue you have raised of changing the aspirational nature of rural and regional students—in terms of them wanting to go to university and how they are approaching that—is really important. If you have some further thoughts you would like to provide for the committee, in a more detailed way, about what, from a government perspective, could be done to change that aspirational nature, they will be really useful.

**Prof. Taggart**—Can I just give an example. In our Rockingham region we are working very closely with five senior high schools. Murdoch used to have an engineering program at Rockingham. It is not there any more. But the five high schools came to us and said, 'Can you do hard maths at university?' The five high schools could not get a cohort to teach 3A, 3B, 3C and 3D maths in year 11 and 12. We said, 'Yes, we can.' So now the five high schools have their maths program delivered from our Rockingham campus. That serves 13 students in five senior high schools.

**CHAIR**—That is great.

**Prof. Taggart**—That is part of the aspirational challenge that we face in areas of social disadvantage. They are big high schools. We have started a program in year 10 to work with the teachers, who are often not maths teachers. They may previously have been teachers in other areas. You mentioned physical education. Many of them are physical education teachers teaching high school mathematics. So we have to work with the high schools now to get the teachers to increase their aspiration for their students to do harder maths, for example, so that maybe one day we can have engineering at Rockingham. But if they are not doing maths in high school it is very hard to attract them to a career like engineering.

**CHAIR**—If you could give some thought to that, we would appreciate it. Also, Ms Black and Professor Nicol, if you would like to join in giving some more thought to that, that would be very useful. Thank you all very much for appearing today. We appreciate it very much.

[2.25 pm]

**BURNS, Ms Wendy, Managing Director, South West Regional College of TAFE**

**DICKINSON, Ms Karen, Managing Director, Kimberley TAFE**

**SCOTT, Mr John, Managing Director, CY O'Connor College of TAFE**

**CHAIR**—I welcome representatives from the network of regional TAFE colleges in Western Australia. Would you like to make short opening statements before we move to questions?

**Ms Dickinson**—Yes, thank you. Kimberley is home to 35,000 people, with the majority living in the six regional towns of Broome, Derby, Fitzroy Crossing, Halls Creek, Kununurra and Wyndham. Kimberley TAFE services an area of 424,000 square kilometres, with campuses located in those six towns. The college delivers certificate I through to diploma qualifications and offers a broad range of qualifications to 3,500 students. Over 50 per cent of this college's students are Aboriginal and a high percentage of our training is delivered in remote or very remote areas. The majority of the students study at the cert I to cert III level.

We deliver employment focused programs in local employment areas of trades, particularly construction and automotive; community services; agrifoods, especially pastoral and conservation land management; aquaculture; tourism and hospitality; business; and creative and cultural arts. All the programs have workplace training and literacy and numeracy embedded in them. And all the training delivery, from youth re-engagement to pre-employment mainstream delivery programs, is pathwayed into employment or further training options.

The ABS data indicates that Aboriginal people living in the Kimberley are the most disadvantaged in WA. As the Aboriginal population grows, as it will, the problems that currently exist may worsen if we do not institute the right solutions, and solutions that are locally focused and place based.

Kimberley TAFE faces unique challenges in the delivery of successful vocational education and training programs. We deliver in very remote areas where the population is sparse, it is expensive to deliver training and the travelling distances are phenomenal. Not forgetting that the ability of a person to successfully achieve educational outcomes is impacted by poor health, poor standard of housing and poor access to other support services. Not forgetting the huge issues around literacy and numeracy levels for all who live in the Kimberley.

We have built a vast knowledge of and valuable local contacts across the region. But before highlighting some of the examples of what we do well, it is important to acknowledge that we do have a major problem facing local training providers in the Kimberley. That problem is deregulation of the VET sector and the subsequent impacts on a region that historically operates in thin market conditions. My concern is that with deregulation many private RTOs will seek to deliver training in the Kimberley. I acknowledge that there are many excellent providers across Australia. However, they work in very different conditions to what is required in the Kimberley to achieve successful training outcomes. I predict, and this has recently been demonstrated in



Broome, that outside providers will choose the low-hanging fruit: students easily placed in jobs or people living in the larger towns. The RTOs are not vying with us to provide training in the very remote—

**CHAIR**—Could I just to stop you for one moment. What is an RTO?

**Ms Dickinson**—Registered training organisation, so other training providers. They are not vying with us to provide training in very remote communities. So the likely outcome will be hundreds of training providers delivering hundreds of courses but very few with an interest in delivering training in the very remote areas. The broader social and economic development of rural and remote communities is not a priority for the private RTOs. Potentially you will end up with a number of RTOs vying for work in the towns and the most neglected communities being further neglected.

Unlike the private RTOs, TAFEs have social and ethical obligations and expectations in relation to access and equity, community development and literacy and numeracy. By allowing deregulation of training providers in the Kimberley, Indigenous people living in remote and very remote communities will be further disadvantaged in terms of achieving their social, economic and educational aspirations. At the moment, there is a good chance that the poor access to education and training in the Kimberley will be made worse by deregulation and an unwillingness of providers to provide training in remote and very remote areas.

I would like to provide details of some of the good work that is done out there, to illustrate how work is done. In Bidgidanga, an Indigenous community with about 500 people, two hours south of Broome, our horticulturalist, Kim, has spent the last 10 to 12 years delivering horticultural training. Today the community prides itself on having a very well-functioning community garden which produces food for the local community, a big nursery area and trial plantation of bush tucker and landscaped gardens throughout the community. This has occurred by linking training with the community aspirations, working with the elders, consultation with the council and other stakeholders, and slowly building trust. The relationship building and trust grow over time. As a number of lecturers have said to me, the only way you can make a difference is going above and beyond what is required. You have to be passionate, you have to be driven, and you have to want to make a difference. I have another lecturer who delivers rural ops on the stations outside of Derby. He said to me just recently, ‘I just take my swag out and join the stock camp. I work closely with the stockmen and manager, who will be mustering one day and fencing the next. I just focus on the training needs of those boys.’

Both these examples illustrate a willingness to work flexibly and they highlight the importance and the role of the lecturer, which is much greater than just the provision of training. The lecturers build relationships. They have a holistic approach. They provide mentoring and support. Without this sort of approach, our experience has been that the learning outcomes are fairly diminished.

In conclusion I just want to say that, if we are to improve access for Indigenous Australians living in remote areas to vocational education and training, we need to have a place-based approach, flexible policy and solutions that address local issues. We certainly need to look at how we fund training providers and the models for service delivery or training delivery in those communities.

**CHAIR**—Thanks, Ms Dickinson. Ms Burns?

**Ms Burns**—I think we have got the north and the south and the middle here today. I have to confess that, in comparison to what my colleagues have to deal with, the south west is kind of the jewel in the crown. Nonetheless, it is still a thin market for training service in much of the issues named, although not quite to the same degree. I moved from the South Australian TAFE system some seven years ago and I brought with me the experience of providing services in regional South Australia, which I thought was pretty challenging in terms of distance and thin markets. But it is not until you come and experience Western Australia that you get any idea of the scale and the issues of how you do it when you have that thin market. Everybody wants to live in Perth. We are lucky in the south west because we have Bunbury—the largest urban centre outside of Perth. Because of that, we can aggregate and get efficiencies of scale to provide some 300 courses at Bunbury and use that as a base to deliver out into our smaller regions.

From my experience, I would say that there is not a singular, quick or easy solution to how we address the needs. The cost of provision of service multiplies with distance and, the smaller the number of end users, the higher the unit cost. We have to decide in Australia about where that line in the sand is, so to speak. At some point, Australia has to decide whether it really wants people to live in its regions and, if it does, how much of that cost of service provision will be met by the public purse and how much by the individual. Do we have to wait until people find out that milk comes from a cow not a carton?

**CHAIR**—I could not agree with you more, Ms Burns.

**Ms Burns**—In the south west corner of Australia, we have five small regional campuses surrounding Bunbury, the first being two hours by road—pretty small by other standards but still pretty high by general Australian standards. We have 300 VET qualifications on offer at Bunbury, which is quite substantial when you consider that there are probably only about 500 VET qualifications in the whole Australian VET network. We are able to provide this training because the staff in regional colleges are passionate, they are part of their communities and they try a whole lot of flexible ways to deliver training.

A lot of my classes are quite small and they have to find ways of doing that. We use a mix of traditional classes and blended delivery and we use learning technology. We do a lot of workplace delivery and assessment where the opportunity provides and generally it is large employers that have come on board to take the benefit of those opportunities. Despite the efforts of our staff to meet those requirements, it still has to be financially viable and we are back to where that line in the sand is. We have a new lecturers' agreement in Western Australia that encourages staff to do non-traditional face-to-face delivery, and 40 per cent of my staff are already reaping the benefit of that. It just go to show how important that is.

It is still hard to meet community expectations for local access, particularly in the small communities, little towns with populations of 5,000, and particularly where programs require expensive equipment and facilities or where staff have to travel to provide services. People like to have their own trades training locally but you cannot do it because it fails that test of viability and getting full use and maintaining equipment when equipment is so expensive.

I would like to comment on a few of the key transitions that are important. One is schools to TAFE. The South West College provides a range of services to our regional schools, providing VET experience for some years 10s and most of the year 11s and 12s. That is about 500 students a year. We have in Western Australia a school-apprenticeship link program which is unique and very popular with students and employers. It is quite different from the school-based apprenticeship the eastern states use, something that should be looked at. The VET in school programs provide that access to TAFE, expertise and facilities. We have a new senior college built in the precinct at Bunbury where the students in year 11 and 12 are able to learn in that adult environment and do full and higher VET qualifications with TAFE, which is a new model for the south-west of Western Australia. I guess we are looking at the Bradfield model in Sydney and we think that giving young people that adult environment and being able to do TAFE at the same time is a good step forward.

On transition to higher education, it is important to note that Western Australia in recent years has tremendously increased the number of apprenticeships in trades. Because of that heavy promotion, many young men in particular are choosing a trade pathway rather than go into higher education. If you think about the current generation, these young fellows at 20 will have a very high income of about 75 grand minimum, a car and their girlfriend, and their peers are up here in Perth's waiting on tables at night and accumulating a HECS debt and probably are not going to graduate with wages anywhere near that scale. So we need to understand that higher education is not the ultimate, and a lot of them recognise that they can defer anyway and do it a bit later in life. So we must not lose sight of that, and you can understand the impact of the resources sector in WA and the attraction now to those vocations.

Apart from accessing TAFE to gain employment, I would note in particular the young people use their gap year in the south-west to do things like traineeships, particularly in retail, or they do short courses in hospitality with the intent of earning income and also to have a means of gaining employment to support them while they are in Perth doing their university studies. That is how they are dealing with that financial situation. One might say it is good business for us, but I do wonder how those students cope. For families to have two homes, one in Perth and one in the south-west, and all that goes with that is quite challenging.

**Senator ADAMS**—We know about that.

**Ms Burns**—That is right. The other thing that we are finding local students have wised up about is the fact that they can enrol in a diploma or an advanced diploma at Bunbury with a view to getting some credit at university. They can often get a year off. I look forward to the enhancement of the AQF in the hope that we can find a way of streamlining those arrangements between individual universities and get some consistency in how much status is given—particularly with the popular information technology and financial services but across a broad range. It would be good if those things could be tidied up. We offer 31 diploma programs and five advanced diploma courses across quite a few fields, all with small numbers, and it is largely because we do have skilled staff and we can provide that delivery flexibly. We also provide bridging programs—for example, enrolled nursing into registered nursing at our local ECU campus; it is about 30 students a year. The presence of the local university campus does provide pathways into the areas they specialise in, but it does leave a whole lot of gaps for the areas in which they do not.

We have a unique arrangement at Margaret River where TAFE, Curtin university and Edith Cowan University have a joint capital investment in the campus at Margaret River. As to the college, we run the campus and they contribute to the operating costs, and then each party maintains a responsibility for their teaching staff and the delivery of programs. That works reasonably well.

The wine centre attracts students from outside the region. You need to do that to make it viable. But we have the problem of low-cost accommodation.

Technology for learning: I guess it is quite exciting to see the promise of broadband services being rolled out. I was around for the RTIF in the mid-nineties in South Australia and I know it did not quite achieve all that was hoped. A couple of things I am acutely aware of are that it is all very well to increase the pipes, but it is what is plugged into them that is going to matter, and the time that is required for staff to develop their skills as users as well develop content and the delivery strategies. It is not distance education. You need an absolute mix.

My staff are using innovative programs such as Elluminate—you have heard about that before—and Moodle. They are trying things like spyglass technology to assess hairdressing and mechanical maintenance in the workplace and cut down the delivery. But a lot of those technologies have limited application. I cannot use the video components of Elluminate because it will bring my entire college infrastructure to a halt! We can do more, I think. The capabilities are there. The willingness is there. It is just that that line in the sand needs to shift a bit so that we can have the resources and we will do more for our communities.

**CHAIR**—Thanks, Ms Burns. Mr Scott, would you like to make an opening statement?

**Mr Scott**—Thank you. Having sat here and listened to part of the discussion from the previous panel of speakers, I was tempted to start my remarks by saying that 75 per cent of our delivery is by some form of flexible model. So we certainly do not have this focus about residential or face-to-face. Initially I will describe a little bit about the wheat belt so that you understand where it is and—

**CHAIR**—You had better look at Senator O'Brien and me, I think!

**Senator ADAMS**—I come from Kojonup, so I think I know.

**Mr Scott**—All right. I have passed this around before, so hopefully you will remember its geographic location within Western Australia. It is just under the size of the state of Victoria. It has 75,000 people in the entire wheat belt. So when Wendy remarked that she had a small regional community of 5,000, there is only one community in the wheat belt that has a population in excess of 5,000 and that is Northam, although Narrogin is getting close to that mark. So the point of differentiation for the wheat belt in comparison to all of the other regional areas serviced by regional TAFE colleges is that there is no one population centre that has more than 10 per cent of the entire population of the wheat belt. It is lots of little communities, and that is the real challenge—very thin markets; huge issues around isolation and access to basic services, and not only in education and training of course. The tyranny of distance is something that everybody has to live with and overcome. There are four relatively large communities:

Northam, Narrogin, Merredin and Morawa, and CY O'Connor College of TAFE has campuses in each of those locations.

Most of the employment that occurs in the wheat belt is related to agriculture or the industries that service the agriculture. The population dynamics within the wheat belt are not uniform. There has been, in fact, for probably the last 20 years, a contraction in the population of the eastern wheat belt as the farms have been consolidated with the introduction of more sophisticated mechanisation and the different economic models that underpin farming these days: that large is good and efficient. Fewer farming families are needed so there has been a migration away from the eastern wheat belt. Conversely, in the areas proximate to Perth, there has been a growth in population, particularly over the last 10 years in response to lifestyle changes and in response to the natural inclination towards a peri-urban farming—small farms. Also, it is a place of lifestyle attraction for fly in/fly out workers and the fact that the extreme western fringe of the wheat belt is less than one hour from Perth airport. So there are some interesting population dynamics going on there.

In terms of our TAFE college, like all of us, we try to be all things to all people. We have 150 qualifications and nine diploma level qualifications. So we do not offer a huge scope, but we do try to cover a very broad spectrum. As I mentioned before, by necessity we are a flexible-delivery college. A focus of the college is to try and provide access to learning pathways to enable the people, in particular the young students, to stay in their communities. This is very much about maintaining the viability of the communities in the wheat belt. Some of the communities go to enormous lengths to facilitate, support and find work placements for and ultimately assist with the employment of youth who come through our college. So there is an issue there just about supporting the ongoing viability because if we do not have that approach then more and more people will leave these small communities and they will eventually wither and close.

Another important issue for our college is working with our Indigenous population, many of whom of course experience varying levels of disadvantage associated with economic situation, substance abuse, isolation and illiteracy. I would imagine that you would have some visibility of the social issues surrounding the community of Narrogin going back 12 months. But 18 months or so before that there were eight suicides of males in fairly quick succession. That is just indicative of the sense of despair and hopelessness in terms of the lack of pathways. In my tenure, and I have been in the college for 15 months, we have developed quite a link with the elders in Narrogin and we are trying to provide some pathways forward for people at all levels. We are fortunate in that located about an hour from Narrogin in a westerly direction is a little community called Wandering—and if you have ever looked at the Western Australian weather charts, you would know it is just about the coldest place in Western Australia. Near Wandering is a former Catholic Aboriginal mission and we are working with the owners of that, the Southern Aboriginal Corporation, who have representation in Narrogin to recommission the mission as a residential Indigenous skills college for Noongar people—the Aboriginal people across the south-west. We are on the journey with that project.

**CHAIR**—Thanks, Mr Scott.

**Senator ADAMS**—I am on another Senate committee, the Select Committee on Regional and Remote Indigenous Communities. We are covering everything—we have been out in the

Kimberley and recently visited Halls Creek and Fitzroy, and Broome for a second time. But we will be going to Narrogin on, I think, 9 October. You will see it on the Senate committee website. I just thought Mr Scott would be a very good witness to come to our hearing at Narrogin.

**CHAIR**—Yes, absolutely.

**Senator ADAMS**—I do not miss opportunities—and certainly for you too, Ms Dickinson, when we are up in the Kimberley again. The date is on the inquiry website.

**Mr Scott**—I will sort that out.

**Senator ADAMS**—Also, the community affairs committee will be looking at suicide, so, once again, it may be an area you could contribute to. But I will ask our secretariat to talk to you about some appropriate witnesses who could appear when we come to Narrogin, because we certainly do not want to be seen to be speaking to just one side. As I have lived very close to the area I know how the background all works in.

**Mr Scott**—It is a very complex area.

**CHAIR**—Do you want to swing into questions, Senator Adams?

**Senator ADAMS**—Ms Dickinson, as we went through a number of the Indigenous communities, we were very strongly criticised about CDEP and the training for certificates I, II and III. Then people were being more or less abandoned because there were no jobs and there was no follow-up to get real jobs for them. There seemed to be quite a theme running through—this was in South Australia, the Northern Territory and the Kimberley. That is something I thought I would just feed back to you.

**Ms Dickinson**—And we would hear the same thing. The resounding message coming out of all the communities is that people are not happy about the changes to CDEP and the lack of real jobs available in those communities.

**Senator ADAMS**—They are sick of training. They are sick of doing these certificates and then ending up without a job.

**Ms Dickinson**—There are no jobs, indeed.

**Senator ADAMS**—The other thing was that young male adults—probably more in the Northern Territory, but we did strike this in the Kimberley as well—once they go through their initiation are men and are not going to go to school with children. Of course, a lot of the younger children are very good—they sit down at the computer and away they go—whereas the older ones are struggling. They are now finding that the young women in the communities are getting jobs, because they have stayed at school and are doing very well, and the males are really quite lost. I do not know that we can refer that to Narrogin, because it is different, but definitely in the remote areas you see them just hanging around and they are the ones getting into trouble. At Fitzroy, they are now coming and asking to be taught.

**CHAIR**—And the question?

**Senator ADAMS**—My question is: how do you see that situation being improved? Do you have programs with TAFE where you can pick them up once they have had a bridging course? Is there a bridging course available? The lot of them cannot read and write; this is the problem, unfortunately.

**Ms Dickinson**—I think the way in which we work out there allows us to go into communities, and it is not just provision of training. With anything we are doing out there we are making some appraisal of community needs. Then we try to line up the training that is obviously meeting those needs. You are quite right about some of the young men. The way we deliver the training has to be cognisant that they will not be going to school. We are trying to find programs that will meet their needs. The pastoral activities land management tends to be an area that they find pretty attractive, so we tend to try to get men that can well relate to that group of people. Certainly we would not be providing the training in a classroom; it would be all pretty much hands-on. Where we do experience a good level of success is in those rural ops programs or working with horses or that sort of area where it is entirely experiential, hands-on training.

**Senator ADAMS**—If they want to move on once they are skilled enough and they really want to improve their education so that they can get a better job, how do you see that fitting in with the proposed Youth Allowance scheme?

**Ms Dickinson**—I am probably not the best person to answer that.

**Mr Scott**—I would like to add to Karen's remarks to your previous question, if you do not mind. Picking up on literacy and numeracy, I certainly see that as a huge issue with the Indigenous members we are working with. It seems to translate to shame in a lot of a cases, an unwillingness to physically come to a bricks and mortar TAFE campus. So we have to work with them and find alternative venues in many cases and deliver it in a way that is culturally appropriate so that they will actually engage. Then if we think about the younger students it is not only about literacy and numeracy; it is about the discipline of learning. Many are yet to learn that. A good example was at the start of this year we had an aspiration to begin a pre-apprenticeship course in plant mechanic in Narrogin, a certificate I level course—it is really the entry level course. The kids were nowhere near ready. If they had started, they all would have failed. So we had to institute another certificate I course in industrial skills, a three-day-a-week model, to give them time to understand about the discipline of learning, showing up and being respectful, not hitting each other and so on. We started with 11 and graduated four, which was a good result. Those four have rolled into the pre-apprenticeship course, which has already started, and they brought three friends with them and we still have seven two months into the pre-apprenticeship course. We spent a lot of time wrapping around deliveries such as a pre-apprenticeship course with literacy and numeracy support. Often we will have two teachers in the classroom.

Responding to your comments about the importance of having an employment outcome, we have certainly picked up on that with our planning for the wandering initiative. The model will build into it employment service providers whose job it will be to make sure that all of the graduates are given the opportunity to gain employment. Obviously some of them will say, 'Thanks, but that's not for me,' but an inherent part of the model will be that we will look at employment outcomes. For example, the Australian Employment Covenant, Andrew Forrest's initiative, will be involved—we have started the discussion with them— and there will be a

range of Indigenous employment service providers involved in the project to make sure that employment is a natural conclusion to the activity.

**Senator ADAMS**—Where I was really leading to was the fact that, unless these young people have the education, they really cannot get full-time jobs to do 30 hours a week if they wish to go on to university later on. This is what I was leading up to—just how important basic education is and to find out where your TAFE programs did sit with this. Was there a stepping stone for the people to go forward. I think you have answered my question.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—Are you saying that their family income would render them ineligible?

**Senator ADAMS**—Sometimes. I think we have had examples in the submissions of a husband and wife as teachers working in a rural community who go over the eligible allowance. They may have six, seven or eight children whom they want to educate. So how are they going to manage? There are some very good examples in the remote areas of just how difficult it is for children to get the education they need to be able to go on and get a full-time job. Especially in that case where mum and dad are working out in a remote community and they are the only two teachers there, their combined salary certainly goes over the limit.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—This is very interesting evidence. I want to go back to the issue of the courses that TAFE is providing in each of the regions that can lead to a credit for certain degrees in the university sector. Where do you find the information about what they are and what they connect to? Can you provide them, now or later, so that we have that sort of detail? It sounded as if there was a bit of vagueness about it.

**CHAIR**—This is a really important point, so we would be very happy if you each take that on notice and just say which of your courses lead to that tertiary education. We are trying to draw the link, and Senator O'Brien has been doing that quite well today.

**Ms Burns**—We could do that. It is difficult because it varies; it varies from year to year and it varies between universities.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—The evidence about the variation and the vagaries of it would be quite useful because—

**CHAIR**—Exactly.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—one would have thought that students planning their education pathway would like some certainty about how they might go about it. Also, from a regional point of view, a way of entering the university sector, perhaps through TAFE, might be a good way for some regional and remote students to make their way into university in an easier and slower way, if you know what I mean.

**Ms Dickinson**—If I can just quickly respond, we have recently signed an MOU with Charles Darwin University and we have a small working group. One of their terms of reference is to do the articulation, to work out where the courses are, and as the students are getting ready for university we can make a referral over to CDU. Certainly, we will be keen to find out what is happening in Western Australian universities, but often there is quite a good cultural link there.



**Mr Scott**—If I could echo Wendy’s comments about the vagueness of it all, I was with Curtin University’s Deputy Vice Chancellor only last week, talking about my aspiration to have a broad based engagement with Curtin. The conversation ended up around the fact that I would have to go off to each faculty and independently negotiate with each one as to what standing they were prepared to offer and what their requirements and benchmarks were. So, whilst they do actually have a published template, there are individual faculty based variations to that.

**Senator O’BRIEN**—If you were suggesting we make a particular recommendation with regard to that, what would you suggest we recommend?

**Mr Scott**—From my point of view, the issue is getting their delivery into the region. The biggest issue that I am confronted with when I am conversing with parents from the wheat belt is that they say, ‘What can you do for my child in the community? We do not want our children going to Perth.’ In fact, some of them do not even want them coming to Northam. That is because we do not have a residential college. I am talking about usually young, male tradesmen—17-year-old youths. The parents do not want to send their sons to Northham because they have to go into the caravan park or the pub. That just does not meet the expectations of many parents, of course, and they are certainly not enamoured with the idea of sending them to Perth. They often do, reluctantly, send them, usually to their relatives. Then they access a Perth based TAFE college.

**CHAIR**—Has there ever been any discussion about or is there any provision in place that we are not aware of for government funding for residential accommodation for TAFE? When we are looking at these enormous distance criteria, it would seem sensible if there could somehow be some accompanying funded residential accommodation.

**Ms Dickinson**—There is quite a large investment being made in the north-west of Western Australia. We have residential accommodation. It is not just going to TAFEs; it is going into educational facilities, so it can be used for TAFE or for any other registered training organisations.

**CHAIR**—Who is doing that?

**Ms Dickinson**—It is the Western Australian government—the Department of Housing and Works and the Department of Education and Training—and the Australian government—FaHCSIA and DEEWR. I think the initiative is ‘Safer Housing for Indigenous Australians’. We will have 74 beds available specifically for students to come in from areas and study; they will be at Fitzroy Crossing, Halls Creek, Derby and Broome.

**CHAIR**—Has there been any talk about broadening that out to a non-Indigenous capacity?

**Ms Dickinson**—It is interesting. We are negotiating some of the scope at the moment, because often when groups come in there will be a mixture of Indigenous and non-Indigenous, so there has to be some flexibility. Primarily it will be available for Indigenous people coming in from the communities, but there will be non-Indigenous faces there as well.

**CHAIR**—Even in the areas that are not as remote, the principle remains the same.

**Ms Burns**—I think on that note that university students are old enough for self-catering facilities, but TAFE students are younger and are not really old enough—or have questionable abilities—to self-cater. They need supervision or whatever, and that is quite expensive. It is an interesting question.

**Mr Scott**—I will extend my comments. In the context that I find myself in, one initiative that we are working on at the moment—I should say we have started it, with evidence at the Narrogin campus already—is to set up a network involving what I am calling a higher education support centre so that we can share our facilities with the higher ed sector and facilitate people who wish to access higher education coming into our campuses and being able to study in a supported manner.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—So a distance education university degree.

**Mr Scott**—Yes.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—Participants might be able to go into that.

**Mr Scott**—I am hoping to develop the relationship with Perth-based universities—and, by extension, others as well, but I will start with Perth—and to interest them in providing their programs, via external studies, to the region. That is beyond just external. If there is a sufficiently large cohort then they might provide tutorial services as well. A good example is probably nursing; I would expect that that would go quite well, because we deliver nursing. It could very well be that our staff will be hired by the university to deliver registered nursing subjects in our infrastructure and to support our students in that way. It would probably be a mix between that and e-learning.

**Ms Burns**—As it stands at the moment, higher education funding sits with universities, so it has to be driven from their end of it. What happens to TAFE in communities is that we want to invest a lot of time and effort in brokering and getting an articulation arrangement. There is a huge cost to that, and we do not have any access to that funding. It is interesting to think about how that model might turn around. In any event, it has to be enough to make it viable to deliver to thin markets.

**CHAIR**—Senator O'Brien, do you have a final question before we have to wind up?

**Senator O'BRIEN**—I did, and it has gone straight out of my head.

**CHAIR**—I will ask mine, and then I will come back to you, if you like.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—Okay.

**CHAIR**—Perhaps, then, one of the things the committee might consider is how we can make a potential collaboration between TAFE and the university sector easier. Do you think it is appropriate if we give that some consideration? There is also this issue that you raised at the beginning, Ms Burns, about the milk in the carton and not the cow, which is a very good analogy for a very big and complex problem. It is about whether or not we want regional communities to be sustainable. I think you used that phrase 'cost per unit'. It comes back to the question: at what

point is that line in the sand, and do we want to go beyond it? Perhaps we need to go a bit more beyond it than we are doing at the moment from a federal perspective. Senator O'Brien?

**Senator O'BRIEN**—No, it has not come back. I will leave it there.

**CHAIR**—All right. I thank you all very much for being here this afternoon. It was extremely useful, and we appreciate your making the time and effort to come along. Thank you very much.

**Proceedings suspended from 3.08 pm to 3.19 pm**

**BOYD, Mr Don, Treasurer, Society for the Provision of Education in Rural Australia**

**CHAIR**—Welcome. Do you wish to make any amendments or alterations to what is a very good submission.

**Mr Boyd**—Thank you. There are some typos. On the bottom of page 2, the third last line at the end ‘regional’ should be ‘students’ and ‘if it can change from home to attend universities or TAFE’. Over on page 4 under the heading ‘Adequacy of government measures to provide for students’ going down to the fourth line ‘models must also be intensified’. Those are the only changes.

**CHAIR**—Thank you, Mr Boyd. Would you like to make an opening statement before we move to questions.

**Mr Boyd**—If I could please. The Society for the Provision of Education in Rural Australia welcomes the opportunity to appear before this Senate hearing and acknowledges the valuable work of the Senate committee process. In SPERA’s written submission, two key points are made. One, a strong and prosperous Australia depends on the nation having strong and viable rural communities. Sustainable rural communities in turn are built on a foundation of the provision of quality rural education. Two, many of the challenges facing regional, rural and remote education in Australia are created as a result of geography—namely, distance and location. SPERA argues that the challenges created by distance in the provision of quality education in regional, rural and remote Australian communities must be addressed if Australia is to have strong and viable communities.

SPERA sees the main challenges facing the provision of quality, non-metropolitan education as the attraction and retention of quality teachers, the attraction and retention of quality educational leaders, the provision of quality professional learning, costs and the need to recognise that there are additional costs associated with, firstly, the attracting and retaining of quality staff to non-metropolitan teaching and learning institutions and providing them with quality professional learning once they are out there; and, secondly, the costs associated with enabling regional, rural and remote students with the means to study in metropolitan locations when there is a need to do so. SPERA believes that these challenges need to be addressed and offers in the written submission possible solutions. Underpinning all these solutions, SPERA believes is the need for policy makers to be more aware of the disadvantages created by distance. This is not to distract from the disadvantages created by such things as low socioeconomic status and Aboriginality as these are very real. SPERA is of the opinion that all three factors impacting on participation, provision and attainment of education for those in non-metropolitan Australia must be addressed by policy that applies a rural lens.

Acknowledging the diversity of regional, rural and remote Australia is also critical in future policy development. All too often, SPERA believes, policy makers have a one-size-fits-all approach to their work, which often ignores non-metropolitan Australia, nor does it acknowledge the diversity of non-metropolitan Australia. Again SPERA thanks the committee for the opportunity to be heard on these issues.

**CHAIR**—Thank you, Mr Boyd. Senator O'Brien.

**Senator O'Brien**—We have taken some evidence today about the provision of access to at least some university courses at regional campuses. We have also heard about the experiences of some students from the Albany area who are intending to go to university. They seemed unaware of what was available in their local community. A number of them said, for example, they wanted to study primary education and they were focusing on travelling to Perth, yet we heard from later witnesses that those courses were available in Albany. How much is being done and how much needs to be done to make rural and regional students aware of what is available for them in their local communities, and how much is it the desire to go to Perth, for example, in the West Australian case—a desire to go to the big city despite what might be available in the local community?

**Mr Boyd**—There are two aspects there. The communication to students in regions about what is available is always a challenge for all of the providers. It is probably difficult to speak in terms of how well they do that.

**Senator O'Brien**—Is that down to the schools?

**Mr Boyd**—It has to be a joint communication process. It is not just the responsibility of a school. There is a need for more partnering between the school sector, the TAFE sector and the higher education sector to make courses that are available locally more visible. It is a matter of schools, universities and TAFE providers working collaboratively within local areas to ensure that, first of all, a range of courses that suit the needs of students in local areas are available, and then that the information about how to enrol, how to access scholarships or whatever, to attend those courses is made available. It varies from community to community in terms of how much awareness there is. If I can use the example of the Geraldton Universities Centre, I would say that because there is an actual university centre in Geraldton—is not a regional university; it is a collaborative project between a number of organisations that have a physical presence in Geraldton. Because of that physical presence, and the number of staff actually working in that facility, I would suggest that in Geraldton, and I do not have evidence to prove this, students are well aware of what courses are available because of the promotion that combined university centre does in Geraldton.

**Senator O'Brien**—I hope that is right, because we had quite a different experience from the Albany group.

**Mr Boyd**—The second part of your question related to—

**Senator O'Brien**—Going to the city for the sake of going to the city, rather than for an education.

**CHAIR**—Bright lights.

**Mr Boyd**—There is a huge continuum in what parents and students want to do. There are some parents and some students who do want to get to the bright lights, but for every one of those students, I would say there is at least another one, or even more, who do not want to go away, basically because they cannot afford to go away. They do not necessarily want to leave

their region. They do not necessarily want to leave home. There are other factors that come into the equation as well. They are very happy to stay in their location and receive their education in that location, but quite often cannot because of the inadequacy of provision in that area. In Western Australia it is even a greater challenge because we do not have a regional university as such in Western Australia. All of the universities have some sort of presence in many of the regional centres but we do not have a regional centre as such.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—In that Geraldton example you gave, you seemed to think that that was a positive development in there being, not a campus of the university, but a multicampus presence at a particular site.

**Mr Boyd**—Yes, at a particular site. They have infrastructure so there is a physical place where students can congregate. It is my understanding that trying to replicate that in other places around Western Australia would be very expensive. There is some thought that Geraldton was quite fortunate in getting the facility but it turned out to be very expensive. A way around that however is that there is a lot of excess capacity in a lot of the TAFE colleges in regional areas. There is a great deal of scope for more collaboration between the higher education sector and the VET sector in combining to have a physical presence. Some of that delivery might be face to face, but there is also the possibility of that face-to-face delivery being supplemented with online learning. It is not necessarily the case, in Western Australia at least and maybe in South Australia and even in other places around Australia, of erecting more buildings for regional universities; I think there is a need for more collaboration with existing providers in creating more scope.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—There is the divergence, which you described, where on the one hand the student and the parents are saying, 'Let's get you to the city,' and on the other hand there are those who say, 'I would rather not go because I cannot afford to go and if there were a course here I would take it.' Where does the responsibility of the Commonwealth cut in in that circumstance where the student wants to go to the city, but has a course available locally, and says that they would like to be subsidised by the taxpayer to do the course in the city, but on the other hand could live at home and get a degree from the local university? Where does the taxpayers' responsibility start and end with that example?

**Mr Boyd**—As you can see from the submission that we have made, SPERA has stressed that, where at all possible, there should be local facilities provided. Obviously in the regional centres you cannot go building universities all over the place. However there will always be some need for rationalisation and I think it could be a case of that local provision being focused very much around courses where there is high demand in regional areas. For example, teaching and nursing and maybe some of the agriculture science areas. Where there is high demand and unmet demand in filling positions in those professions, there could be scope. For very specialised areas, like medicine and things like that, obviously people are going to have to go away. Where there is a case for people to go away, SPERA is of opinion that those students should be funded adequately by the Commonwealth government to ensure that they have access. Does that answer your question?

**Senator O'BRIEN**—It does. Under the current system those students who are fortunate enough to be able to earn about \$19,500 in an 18-month period can claim to be independent. It is suggested in the report the government received on that matter that some are able to get the benefit of relatives or parents providing employment to attain that, whereas others do not have

that benefit. Does the government have an obligation to remove those sorts of unfair circumstances from the system that favour some against others?

**Mr Boyd**—Yes, I think so. I think the system needs to be fair and equitable. Where a student cannot receive the education that they require in the local area, it is important that they have access to the means to enable them to do that. I do not know whether that answers your question.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—I know what you mean. I know where you are coming from. You are trying to deal with it on the basis of equity and need. They are principles that I think the government would say they are trying to observe, in the context of not increasing the spend in the area, by increasing the parental income thresholds and removing a means of obtaining so-called independence, which is not necessarily independence but a pathway for students to access the benefit. It is loosening it up in one area and tightening it up in another, if I can put it that way. If you were to make recommendations—and this might not suit your submission—in the context of measures that would not increase the overall burden on the taxpayer but provide in your view a more equitable set of outcomes, what would they be?

**Mr Boyd**—We sort of go down the pathway of a recommendation in our submission, where we suggest that, if it is necessary for a student to go away because there is no local provision, that student should automatically be seen as financially independent and receive the full youth allowance payment.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—Even if the parents are earning \$200,000 or \$300,000 a year?

**Mr Boyd**—I think it would be fair to put some cap on it, but it is a matter of finding that cap. I know the asset test has been changed but many people in rural areas are asset rich but income poor. It is quite often the asset side that makes it difficult. It is the students who are suffering and therefore not getting the education. It is a loss to the country if a student does not get that education and contribute to society at the level at which they have the potential to contribute. They will not be going back to their local regional, rural or remote community to add value at the professional level or skilled level that they unfortunately have not had the opportunity to gain.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—Which would you prefer: the system as it was with the lower parental income thresholds but a loophole for those who can earn the \$19,500, or a more generous parental income threshold but with a tighter loophole?

**Mr Boyd**—It is difficult. I think at the end of the day we have to look at whatever system is going to enable more students to access higher education.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—Thank you, Mr Boyd.

**Senator ADAMS**—Students now have to work almost full time, 30 hours a week, for nearly two years to earn their money. It was hard enough after one gap year to get them to look at study, especially if they had a very highly paid job or had been doing seasonal work, working in big headers and big tractors, and earning large amounts of money. Now that they have to try and find something with a regular income for 30 hours a week, it is really two years before they can move on. Do you see that two-year gap as a big problem?

**Mr Boyd**—I think it is going to be quite an incredible issue. When you compare metropolitan and non-metropolitan students in terms of that gap year, there are a high percentage of students from non-metropolitan areas that, after taking a gap year, do not proceed into higher education. I suspect with having two years away from study it is going to be a lot harder for students to get into university.

**Senator ADAMS**—As you know, it is not necessary to have a university education to get the jobs that are becoming available with the Gorgon announcement. This really worries me in the Western Australian situation, because rural students especially are very good with their hands—they are usually pretty good mechanics, having learnt the trade working at home on the farm on holidays—and I do not know of any farmer that has been refused a job by a mining company. In the area I come from we have the fly-in fly-out people. The mother might be working in the local hospital or teaching, and then the father is away doing two weeks on and one week off and, of course, earning a lot of money. That immediately puts them over the threshold, but they still have that child that really wants to be independent and work their way through. So there are all sorts of complications. I am always saying Western Australia is different, but with this phenomenon that we have coming up it is going to be huge. A lot of those young people are going to be getting positions in that area.

**Mr Boyd**—In the last boom in Western Australia it was not even a decision between university or going to TAFE to get the skills. They just did not need the skills base and went straight into the workforce, earning more than they would have if they had been an apprentice. Somehow policy needs to look at that, because we need to be looking at the long term. If students over a short period of time, say four or five years, just see the dollar signs and bypass any sort of higher education, be it in the VET sector or in the tertiary sector, we are deskilling our society incredibly, and it will come home to roost in five, 10 or even 20 years down the track. Policy needs to somehow look at that.

**Senator ADAMS**—These young people are going to be doing their two weeks on and one week off. They work 12 hours a day but they still have the other 12 hours to sleep and perhaps study. Is there any work being done with the mining companies on providing a TAFE education to young people or encouraging them to do a university degree while they are working?

**Mr Boyd**—I am not in a position to answer that. I personally do not know of any. It could very likely be happening. Mining companies have various schemes where they encourage people into universities and to do training. But, sorry, I do not think I can answer that.

**Senator ADAMS**—It was just a thought that that might be a way of encouraging—

**Mr Boyd**—Even after doing a 12-hour day, and then having to—but then again, it is the time off, isn't it?

**Senator ADAMS**—That is right; that is where the problem is. That is why I was thinking that that might be a way of moving in off the work. You have these huge numbers; 10½ thousand people are going to be working at Barrow Island for a start, and that is double the size of some of our larger towns. It is quite mind-blowing. You are familiar with URSC? You were talking about it and agricultural science. There are a lot of arguments going on about the facility at the moment, but do you see that as a place where perhaps TAFE education could move in there,



rather than the URSC courses they are offering at the moment? What do you see happening in that respect, because you did mention having a regional focus on education.

**Mr Boyd**—I think I am correct in saying that it is very likely that Curtin university will be withdrawing from URSC and that is a great pity. It would be good to see if the university and TAFE could work collaboratively in some sort of ongoing way to ensure that there is both a strong VET and university presence still in that area. The fact is that Western Australia is still lacking in being able to draw enough professionals into the agricultural industry, and yet we have one university pulling out its presence and wanting to withdraw from it all together or bring it back to a Perth location. There is obviously some sort of policy or planning issue in this state in addressing that issue and concern. I guess I am being a little bit unfair by picking on Western Australia here. You would be aware that there is an organisation being developed called the Primary Industries Education Foundation. Its headquarters will be based in New South Wales, but it is going to be a national body. The primary function of that foundation is to attract and retain professionals into the agricultural industry. At a national level, we are perhaps starting to see some sort of move to try to get a better strategic approach to addressing those issues in terms of attraction and retention of agricultural professionals to get back into the region. But it is not just an issue for agricultural professionals: we see it in medicine and health; we see it in teaching as well as in agriculture. Perhaps the only area where it is lacking is in mining, where they use the huge salaries and fly-in fly-out to overcome the attraction and retention issue. But when we have a look at fly-in fly-out, is that creating sustainable rural communities? I do not think it is.

**Senator ADAMS**—No, as we heard before in evidence, there are a number of rural communities where people are buying little hobby farms and who are able to have the two lifestyles. And the mining communities are missing out up north; they are not really that viable because of the population just moving in and out, and there are lots of things associated with that.

**CHAIR**—I want to follow up on this issue in your submission about having all rural students who have left home and who are eligible for Youth Allowance being considered financially independent. It is something that was put forward by the Victorian education committee of the state government. I am not sure if you are aware of that.

**Mr Boyd**—No.

**CHAIR**—It was exactly that, actually, so obviously it is coming from a number of areas. I certainly take Senator O'Brien's point that the thresholds have been lifted, but one of my concerns is that even those thresholds have been lifted, it will only be a percentage amount of the full independent rate that would otherwise have been gained under independent status. For example, say you earn \$70,000 and you have one child, it is only a very small amount that you would get relative to the full independent rate. I am interested that you are putting this proposition forward, I guess, to recognise and acknowledge the difficulties that exist simply because of the living away from home provision—that is, that having to send a child away from home means there are extra costs being incurred, there is an extra burden and so, regardless of income, you should qualify for assistance. Am I reading that correctly?

**Mr Boyd**—Yes. Basically it is advantaging the student; it is enabling the student, no matter what the parent income is, to receive an education.

**CHAIR**—I guess there is a difficulty that if you were to say, ‘All right, we are going to cap it here or there,’ there is a line there. How do you decide at which point the parent should put in the provision simply because there is this tyranny of distance issue? It becomes quite difficult to put a line on a map. I like the way you have been describing it: it is about enabling the student. So regardless of parental arrangements—and it is an assumption too that parents want to help their children if they have the financial wherewithal. I am sure some would prefer not to contribute. It is a very interesting view you have put forward. Have you given thought to any other measures that the government could perhaps put in place to acknowledge that living away from home circumstance, other than qualifying as independent for Youth Allowance?

**Mr Boyd**—This is the only one that we talked about as an executive, as a society—remembering that I am not here as an individual; I am representing a society. That was the proposal that the group put on the table.

**CHAIR**—Thank you. It would be interesting if you would like to take on notice whether you would like to have some further discussion with your group about whether there are any other measures that would work to address this issue in another way—perhaps a separate financial measure recognising that and not tying it into independent. If you could do that for us, that would be very helpful.

**Mr Boyd**—Yes, I would be happy to do that. I would be happy to take that away and look at it.

**CHAIR**—That would be marvellous. As there are no further questions, Mr Boyd, would you like to make any further comments before we finish?

**Mr Boyd**—No, just thank you very much for the opportunity to be able to speak with you.

**CHAIR**—Thank you very much for giving us your time and for being here today, it has been extremely useful. And, again, congratulations on an excellent submission; it was very good indeed.

**Committee adjourned at 1.44 pm**